The HERITAGE OF PERIL

A·W·MARCHMONT

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Page 66.

THE HERITAGE OF PERIL

By ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

AUTHOR OF "BY RIGHT OF SWORD" AND "A DASH FOR A THRONE"

Illustrations by EDITH LESLIE LANG

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The Heritage of Peril

PROLOGUE

THE HERITAGE

In the ladies' room on the Midland platform of the great New Street Station, Birmingham, one March afternoon, Dessie Merrion sat waiting for her train, and watching with strongly-roused interest a well-dressed woman who was her only companion in the room.

The girl was about one and twenty; quick and capable in looks, and her small, regular features and her general manner suggested considerable independence, self-resource, and natural capacity. Knitting needles were clicking swiftly in her deft fingers, and thus without waste of time she could watch her companion out of her shrewd grey eyes.

The two had been almost alone in the room for nearly half an hour, and during the time the girl had made one or two little approaches to conversation; but these had met with such a quiet though effectual repulse that she had accepted the defeat with a smile at the elder woman's tact. This had rather increased than lessened her interest in the woman, however, and this feeling had been still further heightened by the great contrast which she thought she could perceive between the woman and a man, who was apparently her travelling companion.

She had read the woman as sympathetic, gentle, refined, and endowed with more than a touch of true womanly sweetness; but the man was as repulsive as he was handsome; and when he came to the door of the room

Dessie had conceived an instinctive but violent repugnance and dread of the brutal qualities which she thought she could detect in his character.

Such a companionship puzzled the girl; and as she delighted in problems of the kind, she was sorry when a porter came to say that her train was coming in. She put away her knitting, gathered up her very scanty belongings, and followed the porter out of the room, giving her companion a smile and a pleasant "Good afternoon" as she passed.

The instant she stepped on to the platform her quick eyes caught sight of a furious struggle that was going on at the far end, the central figure of which was the companion of the woman in the waiting-room. Less than half a minute's observation told her what it meant; and she had barely formed her conclusion before she saw handcuffs slipped over the man's wrists, and knew that he had been arrested.

Being a girl of prompt resource, Dessie turned instantly, filled with pity for the woman whose looks had so interested her, and hurried back to warn her. She was still alone, and when she heard the rapidly told news she turned dead white and trembled, looking as though she would faint. But a violent effort gave her self-possession enough to listen to and take Dessie's urgent advice that she should fly at once. She sprang to her feet, and with hasty and somewhat hysterical and incoherent thanks, rushed out of the room by the door on the opposite side from the platform.

The girl had then to hurry to catch her train, and as her carriage glided out of the station she saw the little group of men still at the end of the platform, the man with the handcuffs standing in the centre, his tall form towering over the others, while his dark, handsome face

looked so evil and brutal and menacing that Dessie was glad she had been able to help the woman to escape, and said to herself that she would not be in such a man's power for all that the world contained.

She was more than ever puzzled by the problem of such a strange companionship, and sat lost in speculation and wonder as to its meaning. A minute or two later, she took down her handbag to get her knitting, and then she made a very unpleasant discovery.

In the hurry of warning the woman in the waiting-room, and in the excitement that followed, they had changed hand-bags.

The mishap vexed the girl greatly, and in some respects was rather a serious thing. Her own bag had contained a number of little things which were of no value, but of great use; while one loss was considerable—her purse. Her ticket would have gone, too, had it not been that she had taken it out of her purse, and slipped it into her glove, to be in readiness. But the stupidity of the thing irritated her more than the loss.

"If this is the way I am going to fight my new battle," she said to herself, in her vexation, "I may as well give it up at the start." But her practical common sense asserted itself as she thought further. "My name—at least the name, Dessie Merrion—is in the bag, and the name and address of the people to whom I am going; so that, unless that woman is very different from what I think, she'll send it back to me. It's lucky there's nothing in it to connect me with the past, though even if there had been, she could hardly do much, after what I've seen to-day. What a coincidence that two women so placed, each at the turning corner of life, should jostle one another for a moment at a railway station. I wonder whether she would have repulsed me as she did if she had

known, or whether her kinder nature would have spared me a word of good cheer. I should have liked one from her."

Then the girl leant back in the carriage to think.

She was, indeed, at the turning corner of life, as she had said. She was flying from a past which the crime, sin, and shame of others had gloomed and darkened. In bitter experiences, she was twice her age, and if vicious allurements and surroundings, evil counsel and temptation could have dragged her down, she would have fallen. But her innate purity had carried her through all unscathed. She had stayed by her mother's side until the latter's death had set her free to act for herself, but with a chain of secret sorrow to drag heavily at her heels.

She had cut herself adrift from the old life with one shrewd stroke. She had assumed a name that was untainted by the evil repute that attached to her own, and had started, as she then believed a girl could most easily start, by obtaining a situation as nursery governess. She was on her way to this—the family being that of a builder's wife, named Barker, at Hendon—when she met with the adventure at Birmingham.

Something of what the adventure might mean to her she began to understand a little later, when she roused herself from her reverie and began to examine the handbag which she had brought away in mistake.

Her first thought was to look for some clue to the identity of the owner, in order to write to her; but the bag contained nothing in the nature of such a clue. Besides a very few of the trifles which women carry on a journey —a piece of tatting work, some hairpins, a button hook, etc., etc.—she found in it a handkerchief, new and unmarked; a pair of gloves, also new; a beautiful and costly ivory case of needlework requisites—quite out of char-

acter with the bag itself and everything in it; an envelope with a curl of golden hair—a child's; a child's photograph, much thumbed and broken at the corners, and stained as if with blistering tears. The girl gazed at this with the wistful half-sad intensity of a woman in whom the instincts of maternity were strong. Then thinking she could trace in the child's face the look which she had seen in the woman's eyes, she smiled to it, as if the little thing could understand, and kissed the face.

The last thing she scrutinised was the most incongruous of all—an old, large, shabby leather cigar case, one side of which was much bulged out by the contents.

It was as ill-fitted a companion for the lovely, dainty needlework case as the respective owners had seemed to be to each other.

She opened it, and what she had seen of the man determined her to examine it closely. On one side there were two cigars; very good and costly, as the girl was sufficient judge to know. She scanned them closely, and then peered down into the empty side from which she had taken them. But her curiosity was much more eager concerning a very thick cake of tobacco, which was in the opposite side of the case, and had caused the bulge that had attracted her notice.

She drew it out carefully, and then examined it with the most scrupulous minuteness. She knew that she was handling the property of a scoundrel, and her old associations inclined her to suspect it was there for a special purpose. Her sharp eyes soon detected a crack in the tobacco, and a very little manœuvring and working enabled her to see that it was a cunningly-contrived hiding-place.

As she opened it she gave vent to a low exclamation.

Artfully hidden in it was a piece of tarnished gold, in which were set three huge red stones. The girl, who

knew something of jewels, believed them to be rubies of the purest water, and knew that if genuine, they were worth thousands of pounds.

As she looked at them she almost held her breath in mingled astonishment, admiration and bewilderment.

Her first thought was of the temptation which such a possession constituted. She had but to discontinue her journey, turn back, and take the jewels where she knew well they could be disposed of, and they would bring enough money to keep her beyond the reach of trouble all her life. The drudgery to which she was willingly and intentionally going would be unnecessary; and in its place ease, comfort, and independence would be in her reach. Moreover, she could do it with almost absolute safety. She was going in an assumed name to a place where not a soul knew her by sight; and the trail could be cut without the least difficulty, and with only the remotest chance of her being found.

But the temptation never held her for a moment. She hated crime and wrong-doing in every shape, and would as soon have leapt out of the train as have turned back to the life which had always been so hateful to her.

Then the temptation took a subtler form. It might be all but impossible for Dessie to get rid of the jewels. She could give them back, of course, into the hands of the woman in whose bag they were; but would this be possible? She could read part of the riddle, she thought. Whatever might be the nature of the companionship of the strange couple whose path she had crossed that day, the man was a scoundrel, probably a thief, and these jewels were no doubt the proceeds of some robbery which he dared not get rid of for a while. Possibly he had anticipated the arrest which had taken place, and had put the cigar-case into the woman's bag for safety; and it

would depend upon their relations whether the woman herself knew they were there. So far as that was concerned, Dessie could only wait for some communication.

Meanwhile, her own position was one of extreme perplexity. The woman who had her bag had her address also, and thus could trace her if she went on to Mrs. Barker's. If she gave up the rubies, therefore, to anyone but to her, she must have some kind of proof in writing of what she had done with them. She knew quite well what she ought to do: Call the station master at the next station, give him the bag, and tell him what had happened. But that could have but one effect. The moment the jewels got into the hands of the police, they would question her closely, and in such an examination there was no chance whatever of escaping an inquiry into her antecedents and past life. That meant absolute ruin, so far as concerned her present chance, which she had only obtained with the greatest difficulty. Come what might, she shut that course out, therefore, as impossible.

Another possible course was to send the jewels anonymously to the police, say at Birmingham, through the post. But from that she was cut off by the fact that the owner of the bag could trace her easily; and the result of such a step by her, if the woman made a fuss, would be worse than the first.

Thus the irksome heritage of the jewels thrust her upon this dilemma. She must either keep them for the present or by returning them, face exposure and the probability of ruin. She chose the former course, and having chosen, she put back the rubies in their hiding-place, and covering up the cigar case so that no chance prying eye should see that she possessed so strange a piece of ungirlish property, she set herself to think out her best course.

She calculated that she could not hear from the owner of the bag in less than two days at least; perhaps she would come in person in search of the rubies; and until then the best way was the simplest—just to let everything go on as it would have gone, had she not unexpectedly succeeded to this most embarrassing heritage of probably stolen property. When she knew more, she could lay further plans.

It was not, however, until the fourth day that she heard anything; and then her own bag was returned with the contents intact and a letter. But the letter had neither address nor name, and it was moreover, most curiously and vaguely worded. It ran as follows:—

"No words that I can write can tell you what I owe you for what you did. You can have no knowledge of what you saved me from. I shall treasure your name as a holy thing, and teach my child to love it. But the reason I cannot tell you. Save for the accident of the changed bags—for which I am more thankful than I can say—I should never have known your name. I send your bag back to you as I found it. Destroy that which you have. Of the contents, your own instincts will tell you what I should like to have again some day, if ever I can dare to make myself known to you and claim them. Till then keep them, if you can; if not, destroy them, or do with them as you will. May God for ever bless you and send you such a friend as I would love to be to you if I dared. One kindness do me—forget all you saw when we met."

Dessie read this letter over and over again, each time with some fresh cause of bewilderment as to the meaning which lay behind its extraordinary wording, and she spent many hours in trying to unravel the skein which seemed to form so completely tangled a web.

Then on the third day she made her decision.

She had left one connecting link with the past. No one knew where she had gone nor what name she had adopted; but there remained one means by which a letter could reach her. In her own name she had taken a safe at one of the Safe Deposit Companies in London, in order that she might have a perfectly secret address. She had had this hint from what she knew her father had done some years before.

Her resolve now was to destroy nothing, but to use the safe for the deposit of the handbag and all its contents; and thus bury the secret where no one would ever think to look for it, and where both secret and jewels would be absolutely safe. She did more than this. Being a clever practical girl, she wrote out at considerable length all the circumstances of the adventure while they were fresh in her memory, and she enclosed the statement with the bag and its strangely assorted contents.

While doing this another idea occurred to her—to get together the fullest possible reports of the trial of the man she had seen arrested, and then judge whether in what transpired she could see a way to rid herself of the jewels without danger.

In this again she acted with practical common-sense. She sent for copies of the Birmingham papers of the days following the arrest, and having in that way traced the case from its earliest stage, she followed it to the end.

It was a much more serious one than she had anticipated.

The man's crime was a murder committed in France—the murder of an old relative named Duvivier, under circumstances of considerable cowardice and great cunning. The arrest had been made under an extradition warrant, and it appeared to have been the result of a purely chance meeting. The detectives being at Birmingham on another

matter, had seen and recognised their prisoner, whose name was Rolande Lespard, and they had taken him on the spot.

The **proceedings,** first in England and then in France, dragged on for several months; but the girl followed them closely, and at length read that the man was sentenced, not to death, as he deserved, but to a term of four years at the galleys—the jury finding in the ill temper of the murdered man those extenuating circumstances which only a French jury know how to discover.

But throughout the whole proceedings from first to last not a syllable was said by anyone which could possibly refer to the jewels.

Dessie Merrion collected the papers, made a careful selection of the best reports, in English and French, and then added them to what she had already deposited in the safe.

She resolved to preserve silence on her side too, and merely to wait, lest she should ever be questioned about her strange and embarrassing possession.

For over three years she heard nothing.

Then one day a letter came.

She had left Mrs. Barker's and was living in rooms in London, and the letter followed her.

Again there was no date, nor address, nor signature.

"I want to warn you. I cannot yet make myself known to you, but you are in my thoughts every day. When I last wrote, I did not know what my bag contained, and what you will have found. The villain who put it there, and whose trial you have probably seen, is free, and has been to see me, thinking that what it contained would be in my possession. I told him how the change of bags had occurred; but he does not remember your looks in the least; and your name has never passed my lips, and

never shall. Pray Heaven you may never meet. If you do, shun him as you would, and do, sin. He is an utterly reckless, vicious, desperate, dangerous man. God help the woman who falls into his hands. If you love your life or your honour, do not be that woman. I and my child pray for you always; I, as for a dear sister."

The receipt of this letter gave Dessie Merrion food for much meditation; but it did not disturb her as it would once have done. The chances of her ever meeting Rolande Lespard were so remote, and the chance that even so he would ever recognise her was so much more remote, that it seemed scarcely worth while to deem it a possibility.

"We can never meet," she thought. "Beside if we were to, I know him and could keep out of his way; he could not know me, and could have no motive in pursuing me. The secret is fast locked in the safe; and so far as I am concerned, shall never come out while I live. I will never use the jewels; but I will never give them up while there is the remotest chance that in doing so I shall bring trouble on myself. I may be able to give them up safely perhaps if the writer of the letter should make herself known to me—if ever. But I will never tell the secret. I shall never forget that man; and I believe I should know him among ten thousand, however disguised. The bare memory of his face sets me shuddering with loathing and fear. I am with the writer—I would not be in his power for all the world. No, we shall never meet. Though if we did, and if he recognised me"—she paused and shivered—"those jewels would be in all truth a heritage of peril. But it is impossible. I'll go to the safe to-morrow and put this letter with the other papers; and this is probably the last I shall ever hear of the whole matter."

She carried out her intention, and on the following day added the letter to the papers, some of which she took out and re-read with engrossing interest and curiosity.

Then they were locked up again in the safe, as she then believed, not to be disturbed for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER I

THE PROSPECT OF PERIL

"HERE'S a health to the Old Bailey, Dessie, and long life to all the causes that give one a criminal practice and point the road to a marriageable income;" and the speaker, a handsome frank-faced man of about thirty, smiled to his hostess, lifted his small cup of tea, and drained it at a draught.

Dessie Merrion laughed in response, and a happy light shone in her eyes, and a flush of colour tinged her rather pale cheeks at the reference in his last words.

"Let's add, and good luck to the Press, Tom, and to all who paved the way for the woman journalist."

"A fairly comprehensive toast, taken altogether; but if you and I can't be generous when briefs are coming in, who can and when? I always did like it, but I shall be glad to see it changed." He spoke in a matter of fact tone that made the girl pucker her forehead, puzzled as to his meaning.

"Oh," she cried, as a smile smoothed out the puckers and spread over her face, while she lifted her left hand and kissed the engagement ring—a handsome diamond solitaire—that glistened on her finger "I couldn't think for the moment what you meant."

"Puzzled you to think that I should want you changed in anything, eh? I don't, except in that. Heigho, what

times we will have! Do you know I hate those beastly chambers of mine worse every time I go into them? If my uncle hadn't been such a crotchety old idiot—dear old boy that he is—I shouldn't have had to go into them half so often; and the world would have been spared an awful lot of profanity. I'm afraid it'll tell against the dear old chap when the reckoning comes. He knows all about it, so he can't plead ignorance. If he'd been at the bar, he'd know what a frightful lot of work it takes to earn two hundred pounds a year."

"But you're nearly doing it now? Besides, I could earn nearly that before I was ill."

"Ah, but that doesn't count. He swears he'd never consent to the marriage at all if he thought you meant to do a single stroke of work to take you away from your real mission in life—looking after me. He knows my worth."

"Or how much you need looking after," said Dessie, smiling again. "I shouldn't give up my work without regret, for I know nothing in life so sweet as earning one's—"

"Nothing?" interpolated Tom Cheriton, looking into her eyes, and taking her hand in his.

"I wouldn't give it up for anyone but you," she answered.

"The sooner it's over the better. I wish it was to be to-morrow, Dessie. Ever since you took that wretched fever in that beastly slumming expedition of yours after 'realistic copy,' I've hated the thought of newspapers connected with you."

"Yet it was the fever which gave me one of the two real friends I have in the world—Dora."

"It very nearly robbed me of you altogether, child," said the man, tenderly and lovingly. "And that thought

underlies my opinion. Why, even now, you are as pale and weak as you can be."

"I should have been dead had it not been for Dora's nursing. Dear little mass of inconsistencies that she is. Who would have dreamt that under that surface of frivolity and vanity and shallowness such a heart could beat. I only hope I may ever have a chance of repaying her."

"Pretty young widows with five or six thousand a year don't stand in need of much help as a rule."

"Well, if ever the need came, I would venture my life for her, as she ventured hers for me."

"As much of it as I could permit to be staked, I presume you mean. But there can scarcely be any need. Her new husband will probably take care of that. Confound it, to think that while we've been engaged twelve months, and may have another year to wait, she's only been engaged about a fortnight, and is already talking about being married. I believe they'll be married long before us, after all."

"She is very much in love with him, at any rate. I never read such a letter as her last. She has exhausted a perfect conscript army of superlatives to express admiration. I wonder what he's like. Have you ever seen him, Tom?"

"Seen him? No, how could I? They met somewhere on the Continent, and haven't been in town since. I never heard of the man. But I've seen poor George Vezey," and Cheriton laughed, good-humoredly.

"Poor Mr. Vezey! I think he really cares for her much more than any of you will allow."

"How can a Johnnie like that have feelings?"

"He loves her, Tom, as surely—as surely as you love me. And I am sure this engagement will cut him to the

quick. I know when a man's in earnest, and for all his affectations and surface silliness, George Vezey is a man, and would have made Dora a good husband. I only hope the man—what's his name?—this Count de Montalt, will make her as good a one. But what does Mr. Vezey say?"

"Oh, you know his way, Dess; well, if you can imagine what the effect of a spoonful of strong vinegar would be in a tin of Devonshire cream, you have his state of mind. He's as good-natured a fellow as ever stepped, but he hates this chap,de Montalt; and it wouldn't be fair to take his evidence as without bias. What makes him more wild than enough, too, is that he himself introduced the Count—you should hear him say, the Count—he's like a dog that's got hold of a bit of peppered meat; it's glorious fun. Poor old George! He won't say all he thinks; but it's easy to see what he thinks—that the man's a bad egg."

"I hope for Dora's sake he's too jealous to be right. She's just the woman whom a bad man would nearly kill."

"Yes, she's a bit weak, isn't she? Wants such a husband, for instance, as—as—" he stopped and laughed very brightly, looking into her face with a challenge.

"As I can't spare, eh?" she replied, slipping her hand through his arm, and turning up her face, "Mr. Vanity." Then in a serious tone she added, "I shall be glad to see him and judge for myself. We must stand by Dora in this, Tom. I mean to; and I'm bound to say I don't like the way this thing has started. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if her head's been turned by the man's handsome face, probably helped by a lot of the rubbishy things that most of you men think most of us women like—and he's snapped her up for the sake of her money."

"Yes, I should think that's about it," he said with mock seriousness. "Oh, Dessie, what a detective you would make! Here you are, without a single fact or scrap of evidence, and yet you've got your theory of the crime quite pat—just like most police theories."

"Well, we shall see. At least, I shall," she answered with a smile. "I don't care a bit what you say. I'm not a scrap biassed; but you'll see I'm about right."

"Possibly; women are born to guess. But now, I must be off. And look here, a word before I go. If you go dipping these little fingers "—and he held them up and kissed them as he spoke, slowly and with emphasis—"into other people's hot pies, you mustn't be a bit surprised if you get them burnt, or at least manage to do no more than spill some of the grease and stain on your own clothes. Good-bye!" He laughed, kissed her two or three times very lovingly and then went out.

Dessie left alone, poured herself out another cup of tea, and then, a pleasant smile playing over her face sat down and picked up a book that lay at hand. But instead of opening it to read she let it lie on her lap, and leant back thinking.

Life had been going smoothly enough with her for some time past, and she had gradually pushed her way forward into a position of independence. Two years at Mrs. Barker's as drudge and governess had been an invaluable experience, drilling her into a condition of chronic patience under indescribably galling stings and provocation. Then a crisis had come through the utterly base conduct of a man who had professed to love her, and she had left her situation.

But the step had really turned out for her benefit. She had previously succeeded in getting some few stories accepted for some of the minor novelettes and periodicals,

and as at the time a longer tale had just been taken by one of the big religious publishing houses, she resolved to plunge boldly into the sea of minor literature and newspaper work, and trust to her own hands and brains for a living, without being at the beck and call of a capricious, narrow-minded and uncertain-tempered mistress.

It had been a hard fight, but she had won. She had a natural knack of expressing her thoughts clearly, and as those thoughts originated in a heart the instincts and promptings of which were pure, sincere, religious, and sanguine, she found people to read what she wrote.

The struggle had not been by any means won when Tom Cheriton and she met, however. It happened through some of her newspaper work; and the two were instantly attracted to each other. Then came the illness to which they had referred—a very ugly attack of typhus, in which little Mrs. Dora Markham had saved Dessie's life, by her own personal devoted nursing as well as by the means which her wealth had enabled her to employ. In that way Mrs. Markham had bound the girl to her by the bond of deep gratitude; and it was this strong affection which had set her thinking so seriously about her friend's sudden engagement to a man of whom no one had ever heard a word, except that he was a sort of half-Frenchman, half-Englishman, whom she had met and fallen in love with at Ostend. Dessie was so happy in the love of such a man as Tom Cheriton that she wished Dora no better lot than a second marriage with a man as worthy. But she was vaguely doubtful of and prejudiced against the Count de Montalt.

After Cheriton left she sat thinking closely and earnestly about it, when a telegram came from her friend. "Am home. Come and see me at once. Want to introduce you this evening. Stay the night."

Dessie was but a very few minutes making the necessary preparations; and then she hurried away to South Kensington, where the pretty young widow had a large house in Edgecumbe-square.

The meeting was as cordial as it could be on both sides, and Mrs. Markham, who was full to the brim with one subject, overflowed instantly and poured out voluminous chatter about her lover.

The description alone was enough to make Dessie uncomfortable. He was said to be a "tall, noble-looking, dark, gloriously handsome, and altogether splendid man, with dark eyes that glowed with deep feeling and tenderness." Outside her own novelettes, she always associated that type with the one man, Rolande Lespard, whom she knew to be so desperate a villain. That one man's appearance had prejudiced her against dark, handsome men as a class; and the description now strengthened her prejudice that this particular man was a fortune-hunter.

She prepared herself, therefore, to dislike and suspect him, and when the time came for his arrival "to be introduced," she was half inclined to smile at herself for her condition of somewhat eager critical intolerance and distrust.

Little Mrs. Markham was very serious.

"I do hope you'll like him, Dessie. I can't see how you can help it, but I do hope you will." This weakness was very characteristic. The girl made some general reply, and as she finished, the Count was announced.

Dora Markham blushed crimson, and went hurriedly to him and laid her hands in his. He took them and kissed them, as he smiled and looked very ardently into her face.

Then they turned together to Dessie.

She stood gripping the back of a chair and fighting for calmness.

She had recognised him the instant her eyes fell on him; and when, by a tremendous effort, she pulled herself together, and he came to her, smiling and self-assured, holding out a hand to her, she knew him for none other than the man against whom she had been warned by her unknown friend.

He was Rolande Lespard.

CHAPTER II

THE COUNT DE MONTALT

THE dinner that followed Dessie's introduction to the Count de Montalt was not a very pleasant function. The three were alone, and not one of them was quite at ease. While the servants remained in the room, they chatted vapid commonplaces, and watched each other in the pauses. Dora was nervous lest Dessie might not like the Count; the Count was all curiosity and scrutiny to know what terms he was to be on with a girl whom he knew to have influence with the woman he was to marry; while Dessie herself was so unsettled by the shock of her discovery that she could not be other than ill at ease.

The Count de Montalt was the least affected by the position. He was a fluent talker, and as he had been in many parts of the world, he had abundant material on which to draw for conversation. He also dwelt with a good deal of detail on the particulars of his estate in France, the difficulty of management, the bad times for landowners, the evils of Republicanism, and so on.

After a little time, Dessie began to feel her interest in the man as a human problem overcoming her shock and first shuddering dread; and she scrutinised him very closely as he sat and talked.

He was certainly a strikingly handsome man. Tall and broad and very erect, he had a military air in his carriage; while his regular and very powerful features all suggested great force of character. A man meant to bend

others to his will, thought the girl. A remorseless and untiring enemy, was her next conclusion; and a cruel, relentless, and utterly unscrupulous villain, as she knew from his history.

"You seem to know Europe pretty well," said Dessie, when he had been speaking of some personal experiences in Hungary and afterwards in Russia. "Are many languages as familiar to you as English?"

"No, indeed I have only a sort of conversational smattering of others—German, Italian, Russ, and so on. But I am half English; my mother was English, you know. I know Europe because for years I have been a great traveller in a small European sense. I am alone in the world now—at present, that is," and he raised his eyes and smiled at Dora, who blushed. "I take my name and title through my first wife, whom I had the misfortune to lose within six months of my marrying her. Not by death, but unfortunately by the failure of her mental powers; and till her death—a happy release, of course, for her—I was more or less a wanderer on the face of the earth." He managed to put into his voice and manner an indescribable suggestion that though he had been married, and his marriage had been a trouble at the time, his heart had never been touched, but had remained virgin for Dora to capture.

"And do you remain constant in your admiration of our country's scenery? I am told that all Frenchmen swear there is no scenery in the world like that of the Lower Pyrenees, no land to be loved like that, no people so picturesque as in the Pyrenees, and no quainter picture on earth than one of the homesteads there. Do you think so?"

A shade crossed his face at this question, and a glance of passing anger lighted his eyes. It was in a Pyrenean

homestead that he had committed the murder of his old relative, Duvivier.

" I have not been in the province of the Basses Pyrenees since I was a child," he said. There was a tone in his voice which seemed to warn his hearer away from the subject; and Dessie noted the incident as a confirmation of her belief in his identity, and as something to be remembered for future use.

" Ah, you have perhaps some associations in connection with the district that are painful. That is so with childhood sometimes, and is often found, I know, in old families." He bit his lip at this, but smiled to hide it, as the girl continued. " Dora has told you, of course, that I am a writer, a journalist, a newspaper woman—or whatever people like to call us—and that makes one always curious for odd bits of human nature, you know, like prejudices and fancies, likes and dislikes. I have never met before with a prejudice against a whole province I must confess. I've known people dislike towns, particular houses, and sometimes a whole county or the people in it. But that is generally personal. Either they have done something in the place or had something done to them by the people—a prejudice with a personal foundation." She smiled as she made this thrust, and seeing his discomfiture, she harped on the subject of the country of the Pyrenees and his prejudice against it until the man's anger showed so plainly in his face that Dessie feared her friend would see it and be either annoyed or grieved; and then she turned the conversation. But she had learnt something from it.

In this way the dinner passed, and as the Count did not wish to stay and smoke by himself, the three went to the drawing-room together.

There Mrs. Markham played and sang. She had a

weak sweet soprano of limited range, and warbled little songs with a lot of love in them; and to-night being very sentimental, she put unusual feeling into the singing and made the Count sit close by her side.

Dessie sat back and watched; and more than once she saw expressions cross the dark, handsome, strong face of the man, seeming to reflect brooding thoughts, which might have been raised by her thrusts at the dinner table.

Her imagination was morbidly busy as she sat and watched him, sitting close to the woman he was deliberately deceiving; and on his face, held as it was a little in the shadow of the soft lamplight, Dessie pictured a smile of cynical triumph, at the ease with which he had found and won this last victim, and of contempt for that side of Dora's character which alone he could have seen.

The qualities which counterbalanced the little surface vanities of the widow would be sealed fountains to him. He could not appreciate her real love of truth for truth's sake; her ready devotion in nursing Dessie through her illness; her instinctive impulses to use her money to stay any plea of want and misery. These things to such a man would be but so many proofs that a woman was weak and a fool. They might almost give him cause for a chuckle that they made her the readier dupe for him, and promised him an easier life with her in the future. And as the girl thought this her cheek flushed with anger and indignation.

Then another fancy took possession of her. As she gazed intently at the man's hard, clear profile, and thought of his past as it was known to her, the room seemed to fade, the jingle of the piano died away, and the scene changed to the low-roofed kitchen-parlour of a Pyrenean homestead. The hard, grim face was still the central figure, a look of keen murderous determination

lighting the eyes, which were fixed on the face of a second figure in the square room—that of an old and feeble man asleep on a high-backed wooden settle, by the side of the broad hearth, where a log was alternately smouldering and bursting into thin, licking tongues of flame.

The old man's slumber was accompanied by heavy guttural breathing and wheezing gasps, with an occasional snore, as the head got into an uncomfortable position. And at every sound, denoting that the man's sleep was getting deeper, the dark, heavy face of the watcher across the hearth seemed to grow more set and pitiless, as though some half-formed but wholly deadly purpose was ripening into instant resolve.

Presently the watcher rose stealthily from his chair, and moving slowly and silently across the floor, stood by the sleeper, and bending down, looked intently into the white, rugged, deeply-lined, old face. Then he touched a hand, lifted it, and let it fall. It was nerveless and limp; but the jerk made the sleeper stir uneasily, and draw a breath deeper and longer than usual.

The man by his side stood as still as death itself.

Then, after a pause, he put his own hand, with infinite care and deftness of touch, into the other's pocket, and took out a key. He looked at it in the leap of a fire flame, and turned and stole with silent steps from the room.

Soon he was back again, holding a paper which he had evidently fetched from some locked place of which he had taken the key.

It was a will, and holding it near the fire he read it by the light of the leaping tongues of uncertain flame. What he read angered him, and his eyes seemed to grow red and bloodshot with passion, while the even, regular, comely

features looked evil and venomous as he glanced from the paper to the sleeper.

Then he went again from the room and after a time returned, this time carrying a bundle of small papers and a bag. The bag he unfastened. It contained gold coins. Among the papers was a large bundle of soiled bank notes. These and the bag he put on the table, and then after a hurried search among the other papers he went away, for the third time, and returned with the key in his hand. His face now wore a devil's smile.

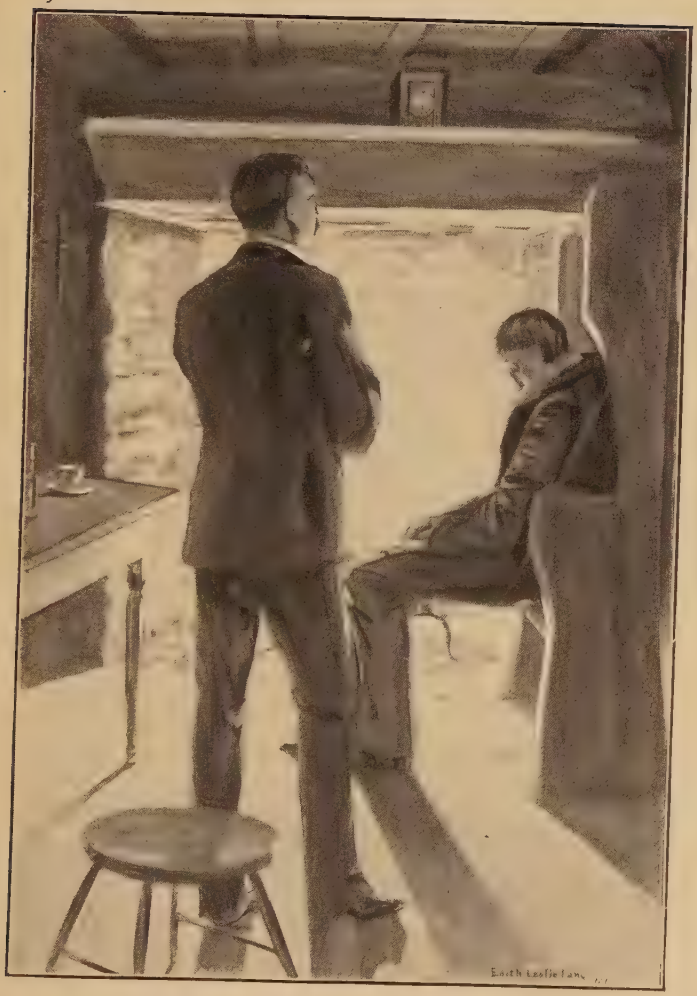
He made no attempt to put the key back, but crept with quite silent tread to the settle. Next he poured the contents of a small bottle into a teacup, putting the bottle back in his pocket. From a shelf by the side of the hearth he took a large medicine bottle, from which he poured some of the dark contents into the cup, and clinking the bottle and cup together, as if clumsily, he put his hand on the old man's shoulder and shook him.

"Uncle, uncle, here's your medicine," he cried, holding the big bottle so that the flickering flame fell on it.

The old man moved sleepily, mumbled some incoherent words, stretched out his arms stiffly, and opening his eyes lazily swore at the other for having woke him. He was as evil-looking as his companion—a wizened, cunning, animal face, all cruelty, greed and hardness. He looked hideous as, half asleep, he held out his hand for the medicine. He took it, drank it off at a gulp, started, made a wry face, oathed again, swore that it was nastier than ever, and settled himself down to renew his broken nap.

In another minute he was asleep again.

The dark, glittering eyes had never left his face for a moment, and the younger man, seemingly so passive, had been all vigilance, ready to pounce on his victim and



"He'll be dead in an hour—by nine, say."

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finish the work by violence if he showed the least sign of resistance.

As the old man let his head fall again in sleep his companion smiled and heaved a heavy sigh of relief. He first examined the cup to see that it was empty, smelt it, smiling more broadly than ever as he did so, and then, having washed it out with water, smashed it and put the pieces into his pocket. He next took another cup of just the same pattern, poured into it a dose of the medicine, threw half of it into the fire, and drank the remainder, putting down the empty cup close by the old man's hand. Then he put the key back in the sleeper's pocket, but without care, knowing there was no fear of any awakening. That done, he bent over the old man, listened to his breathing, which was now much more stertorous than before, and then he craned up his head to see the time by the little clock that stood on the mantelshelf, shaded from the firelight.

"He'll be dead in an hour—by nine, say. I must get back about then." And with that he swept the money into his pocket, and went away, leaving the sleeper alone to breathe out his remaining life in the stertorous gasps which were growing more and more irregular every moment, while the leaping shadows that danced on wall and ceiling were shooting up in long, grotesque, fantastic, ghoulish shapes, and stretching out their hands, as if already claiming the doomed man for shadowland.

Stillness brooded in the room, broken only by the choking, heavy breathing of the fast dying man.

About an hour later, the sounds of footsteps and voices and laughter were heard outside the homestead. Amongst them were the deep tones of the man who had left the place recently. He was laughing and joking and rallying his two companions. The three entered with

the laughter on their lips evoked by the jest of the dark man.

He came into the chamber of death with a swagger and an oath.

Then, as if catching sight of the figure on the settle, he stopped his laughter and cried,

"Hullo, here's my uncle asleep. I couldn't think where the deuce he'd got to. Uncle, here are Ambroise and Giraud. I've walked from Asson, and am about as hungry as the——Why," he stopped and made a big demonstration of excitement, "what's the matter? Here, Ambroise, Giraud, my dear old uncle's ill. Look, look. My God he's dead. Died in his sleep. That's what the doctor always said would happen. Oh, my uncle, my uncle," and, with a burst of emotion, he threw himself on his knees.

At that instant a loud crash of music chords startled the girl, and brought her back from her picture dream of the cowardly crime which she knew had been committed by the man who had now risen, and was coming to her to shake hands, and bid her good night.

The touch of his flesh made her cringe and shudder, and the room seemed lighter and purer the instant he had passed out of it.

Then, moved by an impulse, Dessie put her arms round her friend's waist, and holding her as though shielding her from the attack which she knew this villain was planning against her happiness, and perhaps against her life, she kissed her passionately and almost fiercely, over and over again.

And as she did it she vowed to herself that she would indeed step in between the man and his intended victim, let the cost to herself be what it might.

The next instant she was listening to Mrs. Mark-

ham's protest against her strange action, and then to the pleased, proud and eager questions whether she did not think the Count was all that a gallant, noble, handsome man should be.

CHAPTER III

"YOU ARE ROLANDE LESPARD"

THE two friends sat talking together for a long time after the Count had left, and Dessie found it difficult to evade the questions which the infatuated little widow poured upon her.

"I want to know more about him, Dora," said the girl more than once. "Who he is, what he is, what he has done, what sort of a life he has lived."

Mrs. Markham shrugged her shoulders, and tossed her head with a gesture of impatience. She was of a fair haired, small featured, large eyed, doll-like type of woman; small and pretty, but too conscious of her good looks, and very disposed to be playful and kittenish. Altogether impatient of contradiction and control, she was apt to do any mad thing in a moment of impulse. She was a little afraid of Dessie's quiet, penetrating, self-strong manner; and while most anxious to have her genuine opinion of the Count, inclined to be irritable and peevish because that opinion was not as enthusiastic as her own.

"I thought you could read people so quickly," she answered, rather testily. "What more can you want to know? Do you suppose I can't trust my own instincts?"

"If it was a matter of giving a five or a ten pound note to some charity on the strength of his recommendation, I should say by all means follow your impulse. But when it comes to giving this"—she took her friend's hand and

pressed it and smiled—"I won't trust anyone's instincts. I'm like my Tom; I want facts."

Mrs. Markham withdrew her hand and frowned.

"If I can't trust my own heart I can trust nothing," she said. "I can't for the life of me understand how you can have a lingering shade of doubt when once you've looked into Godefroi's eyes. Did you look searchingly into them?"

"Men don't carry their characters written on their faces, dear."

"If you can't go by a man's eyes, what can you go by? Do you want to know his acts? Well, don't I know them? Hasn't he shown himself the kindest, dearest, gentlest, and most thoughtful being in the world? Why on earth do you—you of all others in the world—want to set me against him?"

"My dear Dora, I haven't tried to set you against him," cried Dessie. "If he is the man you believe him, then there is nothing in the world would please me more than that you should be his wife."

Mrs. Markham was silenced for a moment, but a movement of her shoulders showed her vexation.

"'If he's the man I believe him,'" she repeated. "What does that mean? Oh, I suppose you think it's the money that attracts him. I hate the money. I wish I hadn't any. It only makes one suspect everybody about one. Either they are rushing after it for themselves or they want to keep others from sharing it. I wish I was poor," and a tear of anger glistened for a moment in her light blue eyes.

"You are very ridiculous, Dora," said Dessie quietly, "and if I didn't know that in your heart you do not for a moment believe me capable of being in your second category, I'd walk out of your house and never enter it

again. In word, you have just accused me impliedly of trying to set you against the Count in order to keep him from sharing your money. If I could do that, I should be just the meanest thing on earth."

"I didn't mean that at all," said the widow, weakly and half-tearfully; the girl's quiet resolution and plain speech rather frightened her. "I know you're as true a friend as anyone can be. But—but it's so disappointing when you go and make up your mind not to like someone I like and want you to like."

"I haven't even told you I don't like him, dear."

"No, but I can see it easily enough, although you do think my instincts are not quick and true, and that I'm blind and silly and—and everything. I declare it makes me wish I hadn't come home. And I thought you'd be so pleased." The tone of her voice was beginning to suggest tears; and Dessie noticing it, said with real feeling:

"Nothing will please me more than your real happiness, Dora. I'll do anything I can to secure it for you. But do just think what you're asking me. You want me in cold blood to take the same view as you do of the man you love passionately. Do you think as I do about my Tom?"

"Oh, Mr. Cheriton's different," said the widow, as if repudiating the idea of a comparison between the two men.

"Ought not to be mentioned in the same breath, eh?" asked Dessie, laughing. "Well, how can I be more enthusiastic and less critical of your lover than you are of mine?"

Mrs. Markham paused a moment, and then said, a little triumphantly.

"But I've never said a word against Mr. Cheriton,

and I like him immensely. Why then do you do so against the Count?"

"There has never been any question who and what Tom is. I don't know a word about the Count."

"But one doesn't always wait to know all the ins and outs of a person's life in order to like them. Why, if it comes to that, I know nothing about you—and there's no doubt about my loving you, is there?"

"You and I are not going to be man and wife; and if we disagreed we could part; but if you were going to put yourself and your happiness, everything, into my charge, you'd want to know everything."

"Not a bit of it, Dessie. I'd trust you to-morrow with every penny piece I have in the world, and give you unlimited power to do with me just what you please. When I trust, I trust wholly."

Dessie was silenced at this. She kissed her companion without adding a word; and for the moment the subject was dropped. But after they had gone upstairs to bed, Dessie went into her companion's room for a last few words.

"Dora, if I seem in any way unbendable in this thing, remember it is only my love for you that makes me urge you to open your eyes to other things beside mere looks and love. Sit here a bit; I'll tell you a passage of my own life, to show you why I don't trust every man as I do my Tom."

Mrs. Markham pushed a low stool to her companion's side, and sat with her head resting on Dessie's lap, the girl's fingers playing with her hair as she spoke.

"Three or four years ago, I was governess in a very disagreeable family, and the conditions of life were such that the place was almost unendurable. Then I met a man—we'll call him L—, who made much of me, and in

his way, fell headlong in love. I did not love him: I didn't think then I should ever love anyone: And when he asked me to marry him, I refused. He asked me again, and I refused: And then, when he pressed me a third time, I told him the truth—that I didn't love him, but, if he would be contented with that, I would marry him. He vowed he was more than delighted, and we were engaged. I am bound to say he did everything in his power to prove how great his love was."

"Was he young or old?"

"Young, dear; and good-looking, and as looks go, such a man as a girl might be proud to be engaged to. He was pretty well off, too, and gave me rich presents. Well, there are certain things in my past life—nothing that is any disgrace to me, thank God—but still things which the man I was to marry ought to know. I told him, therefore, and while he thanked me for telling him, he said they made no difference to him."

"He was a good man, Dessie."

"Yes, so I thought, and I was more nearly in love with him then than at any other time. I could have loved him, but just at that time a most unexpected thing happened. In two months no less than four people who stood between him and a baronetcy died; and from being a man with a fairly good income, looked up to in his little chapel set, he became a baronet with a big income. The change was more than his moderate brain could endure without reeling. His engagement to me galled and fretted him; and I saw him tugging at the chain. I offered to release him; and then he showed how really weak he was. He was still in love with me—more in love than ever, I think, because he had brought himself to believe there was a barrier of caste between us, but he fell away so fast morally that I began to despise him. I wrote and told him

that I would not marry him, and it was when he answered the letter in person—I shall never forget the interview—that I learnt at first hand how utterly base and contemptible a thing a man may be."

She paused a moment, and Dora murmured a word of sympathy.

"I want no sympathy, Dora," she said, quickly. "It was a lucky escape. This mean hound threw in my face what I had told him, and declared that, as he was now a public man, it must separate us. But he still loved me, he said, and declared that his fortune was at my disposal if—you can guess what he said. My blood is hot now as I think of it. You can guess, too, the answer I made. But that is not the worst, nor anything like the worst. The coward went to the woman in whose house I was governess, and telling her what I had told him in all honourable confidence got me dismissed at a moment's notice, thrown on to the streets to shift for myself, in order that, as he thought, I might be compelled through want to submit to his vile proposals."

Her companion drew in a quick breath of pain.

"That is man, dear!" said Dessie, bitterly. "And that is why I urge you to trust no man till you have tested him."

Mrs. Markham got up from her stool, and put her arms round the girl. She was full of pity for her friend, but she saw no connection between that man's scoundrelism and her own lover. The thought was absurd.

"Poor Dessie! What an experience and what an escape," she said. "But my Godefroi would never act like that."

Dessie smiled in disappointment, and the smile had not died out of her face and eyes when her companion kissed her again, and they bade each other good night.

Dessie went to her room filled with fear lest her friend's infatuation and impulsiveness should end in trouble; and before she fell asleep she resolved on one step—to speak openly to the man who called himself the Count de Montalt, and let him see that she knew his true character.

The opportunity came a little sooner than she had intended. Her plan, as she thought it out during the night, was to tell Tom something of what she knew, and then with him to face the Count together. But events hurried her forward.

The next day Mrs. Markham was not very well, and did not get up to breakfast. The Count called early and Dessie went down to see him. As she left the room Mrs. Markham said with a smile that it "would lead the two to a better understanding if they saw something of each other alone." There was much more truth in this than she anticipated.

Dessie had been willing, for her friend's sake, to play a part the night before and meet the Count on terms of apparent friendship; but it was a different thing when the two were alone, and after she herself had determined on a course of complete frankness.

She had thought out carefully the line that should be taken. She wished to spare her friend in every possible way: The blow to her heart would not be less than that to her self-respect in the knowledge that she had been duped by such a man. But it was essential that the revelation of the scoundrel's true character should be complete, or the little widow's weakness and infatuation might allow of his continuing to exercise great influence upon her.

Dessie's heart beat a little faster than usual, as she went down the broad staircase to the morning room, into

which the visitor had been shown; but outwardly she was calm enough and apparently self-possessed. To test her steadiness she paused outside the room, and held up her hand to see if it trembled at all. It did a little.

"I might be a child going to be slapped," she thought.

The Count was standing in the deep bay window, looking out on the square garden, congratulating himself upon the size and magnificence of the house and the wealth of the owner which it evidenced; but he turned quickly when he heard the door open, and Dessie saw the look of pleasure, which he had put on to greet Dora, change to one of surprise and inquiry.

He came hurrying towards her with the same overacted politeness which had impressed her so unfavourably on the previous evening.

She had to deal the first blow. Now that they were alone, no consideration on earth could make her touch his hand.

He came toward her with it extended, his face expressing a sort of smiling anxiety as to the cause of Mrs. Markham's absence.

"I trust dear Mrs. Markham is well—as well as I hope you are, Miss Merrion. Pray tell me." Then with a quiet change of voice and manner, he added, "You did not see my hand, I think, Miss Merrion,—excuse me," and he held it out in front of her, and looked straight into her face.

She returned his look quite resolutely, and with a motion of the hand toward a chair, she replied—

"Mrs. Markham has nothing more serious the matter with her than a slight headache. You need have no anxiety on her account whatever. She rather wished me, indeed, to come and see you alone, thinking that perhaps we should get to understand one another better if we were

alone. I think so too," she added, after a pause for emphasis, eyeing him steadily.

"My dear Miss Merrion, I am more than charmed," he answered, effusively. "My dear Dora's friends must be my friends—or they could not be hers, of course." He made his meaning clear with a glance.

"Naturally," assented the girl. "I quite understand that."

"But I do not think I quite understand the position," he answered. "Pardon me if I ask you to explain it to me a little more clearly. I have heard so much of you—and all in your praise. I came to London expecting and hoping to find you, if only half as good as you had been described, yet still the best possible of friends for my Dora, and, if I may say so, for myself. I came here last night; I had the infinite honour of an introduction to you. We had a pleasant dinner, a quiet evening, an hour of friendly companionship. We parted in the best vein of friendship, apparently. I arranged to call early this morning. I call. I do not see my Dora, my future wife; but instead, you receive me; and when I offer you my hand, hoping the relations of last evening are to continue, you will not take it; and instead, you say you have come down to have an understanding. Is it a surprise that I ask myself what does this mean? What is it? Who is this charming young lady that meets me? What is it she wishes?"

He paused, threw his hands and shoulders up, and assumed a look of greatly injured innocence.

Dessie had been thinking quickly while he spoke, and now paused a moment before replying. When she answered it was with a clear, crisp emphasis that made every word tell.

"The meaning is this. I want to know why you have

imposed on my friend as the Count de Montalt, when in fact you are Rolande Lespard, the murderer of your uncle, old Paul Duvivier?"

The man sprang to his feet in astonishment and obvious terror. His face went white, and for a full minute he was speechless, staring at the girl like a man out of his senses. Then he sat down again, and strove to regain his self-possession. It was a long fight, and when at length he managed to gasp out—

"It is a lie, Mon Dieu! a tremendous, villainous, awful lie!" his voice had lost all the ring of strength and depth that had seemed to suggest so much force and power.

And during the whole time, Dessie remained looking calmly and steadily at him, watching him without saying a word.

CHAPTER IV

A BRIBE

THE success of Dessie's stroke lay in its suddenness. At a moment when the man was congratulating himself on his extraordinary good fortune in having won the love of a rich woman who trusted him so absolutely that she did not think it worth while to make the slightest inquiry about him, the girl had stepped in to break down everything.

His rage and chagrin added to his confusion, and it was a long time before he could recover himself sufficiently to think connectedly over the position.

He had often had this friend of Dora's in his thoughts; and gauging her by his own standards, he had calculated that she would probably turn out to be no more than a harpy, who might resent the rich woman passing out of her hands and into his own. He had guessed that he would in all probability be able to buy over this opposition at a price; and had always looked forward to having to do something of the kind.

But this belief was only a faint one now, as he looked into the resolute little face of his accuser, whose eyes were fixed on him with an expression of such sturdy resolution that he felt he could have strangled her.

How could she have got her knowledge of him?

There was not a detective in London who would have recognised him in that character; scarcely one in all England; and yet this weak chit of a girl had known him at

a glance. More than that, she had been shrewd enough to use her knowledge dexterously enough to outwit him and cause him to behave like a nervous fool. He had thus made contradiction more than difficult; yet it was his only course.

"You must excuse my illness," he said, when at length he regained self-possession, speaking as in a voice of pain and weakness. "I am subject to these attacks—they are at my heart—when agitated or excited. In the moment, I was so angered by your words; perhaps not unjustifiably angered, you will allow; and for the moment my heart threatened me. Now I am myself again: My illness has passed. I pray you to excuse me if I have caused you any uneasiness."

"You did not," returned Dessie, cuttingly. "I thoroughly understood the nature of the attack."

"A mistake such as you have made, Miss Merrion, would excite anyone. If it had been made, and the slander uttered by a man, it might have cost him his life."

"By poison do you mean? I should not be surprised—if you had the opportunity."

"I do not understand your reference. If you—"

"I will explain," interrupted Dessie. "It was poison you used to murder M. Duvivier. That is what I mean." But he was not a man to be taken twice off his guard.

"I have had the pleasure of meeting you only once before to-day; and I am at a complete loss to understand, therefore, what motive you can possibly have in making this extraordinary mistake in regard to me. Perhaps you will tell me."

"It is no mistake. My motive is defence of my friend from a man I consider so dangerous as yourself."

"Well, I can only assure you that you are labouring

under an extraordinary delusion; and I know no more than this chair how you come to associate me with the wretch whose name you mentioned just now—Lespard."

"You mean you want to know how I recognise you," said Dessie, with direct logic. "That is my business. It is enough that I do recognise you and intend to use my knowledge."

"You speak rather in riddles, Miss Merrion. I presume you mean by using your knowledge that you intend to try and separate Mrs. Markham and me for some purposes of your own. You will not find it an easy task to persuade her to believe what is an untrue charge against me, which I shall not have the slightest difficulty in meeting at any time and in any way she may wish. The position of anyone who has falsely accused me will not be a very agreeable one then in her opinion."

"You mean I shall forfeit her friendship if I cannot make my words good. Yes; that is exceedingly probable."

"I am not a vindictive man, Miss Merrion. I do not wish that Dora should lose a friend who is so staunch as you evidently are, since your staunchness for her leads you to take a step of this shall I say, hazardous kind? I assure you on my honour as a gentleman that you are profoundly and absolutely mistaken. I pledge you my word, further, to give you any proof of your mistake that you, or anyone acting with you, like to ask for. More than that, I will bear no grudge whatever for the mistake —I will set it down to that chivalrous goodness of heart which is constantly impelling people to make the strangest errors. But I do not wish that Dora should be distressed and pained and shocked by hearing that I, her affianced husband, have been thus accused; and that you, her dearest friend, have made so vile a charge."

"What is your object in that?" said Dessie, rather thinking aloud than putting a question. But he took it up readily and answered promptly.

"I have no object except to satisfy you of your error; and to save you from the humiliation of having your strange delusion exposed." He paused a moment and then added: "I am not mistaken, I think, in saying you are engaged to be married to a barrister, Mr. Cheriton, is it not? Well, I suggest to you to tell him. I will accompany you, if you like; and then he can name the best and readiest means of proving to you my identity. Were I in France, I could offer you five hundred proofs in an hour; but here—" He stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

Dessie looked at him steadily, as if to try and read his motive; but he met her gaze without flinching, and with a calm assurance that baffled her.

"I need no proof of your identity. I know you," she said, firmly.

"May I ask on what ground you base this most strange belief? What has caused it?"

"No. You may not. At least I cannot answer. It is enough that I know it."

He knitted his thick brows a moment in thought and then got up from his chair and said in a sterner and more forceful tone than he had yet used:

"Well, Miss Merrion, I have done my best to save you from the unpleasant consequences of your own extraordinary blunder. I have resolutely kept in check my natural resentment. But I can do no more. I have offered to convince you privately of your unwarrantable blunder; and you must accept the consequences of your refusal. You must take what course you please. For my part, I shall see Mrs. Markham at once, and tell her

what you have said. Will you be good enough to have a message sent to her that I desire to see her at once on urgent business, or shall I ring for a servant?"

He walked towards the bell as he spoke, and laid his hand on it.

His assurance made Dessie waver. Was it possible that she was mistaken? Fifty stories of curious and wonderful resemblances flashed across her thoughts. Ought she not to make quite sure before speaking?

He was watching her closely, and noted her indecision.

"Come, come, Miss Merrion, we have carried this farce far enough. Will you send the message to Mrs. Markham, or shall I?"

She frowned in her dilemma. A moment later he said firmly:

"I will wait no longer," and with that he rang the bell sharply.

"You will give me these proofs?" she asked, quickly.

"You have refused them. I prefer my way now," he answered, abruptly. "These things are better faced at once."

"I will accept your offer of the proofs, if you like," said Dessie, almost as the door opened, painfully conscious of the weakness implied in the concession.

"As you will then," answered the man with a bow and a flash of triumph; "but it is only at your request I consent now, and for your sake."

Then the servant opened the door.

"There is nothing wanted, the bell was rung in mistake," said Dessie. The servant bowed and withdrew, and then the Count turned calmly to Dessie and said:—

"And what now do you propose to do?"

Dessie's momentary indecision was destined to cost her

dear. At first she could not make up her mind what course to pursue; but her lover came into her thoughts.

"You mentioned Mr. Cheriton's name," she said, and then stopped abruptly. She was about to propose going to him, when it occurred to her that if they went she must tell Tom in this man's presence all that she knew about him, and how she had come to recognise him. But that would open up such a wide, new field of investigation into her own past, that it startled her. She had yet to tell Tom her past life, and preferred to do that in her own way and at her own time. Moreover, she was quite unwilling to let the man, who was now eyeing her so intently and with such a threatening expression, learn that she was the girl for whom he was seeking, and to whom the jewels had been passed on.

Her companion could not help seeing her hesitation, and was shrewd enough to presume upon it. A moment after she had mentioned Tom Cheriton's name and he saw her hesitation, he jumped to his feet with a gesture of energy and said:—

"Nothing will suit me so well. Permit that I send at once for a cab, and we will go together to his chambers and lay the facts before him. It is better for your sake that this mistake of yours should not go beyond the narrowest circle. Will you get ready at once?"

Dessie bit her lip in mortification. He was playing a part. She knew that well enough, and believed that he guessed she knew it. But the chance of the moment was against her, and she was unable to accept the very test which a few minutes before she herself had proposed.

"I shall take my own time and means to prove the truth of what I have said," she answered; and a feeble reply it was, despite the firm, sharp tone in which she spoke.

At this the Count threw himself down in his chair again, and tossed up his hands with a gesture of surprise and protest as if at a loss to understand her conduct.

"Really, Miss Merrion, I put it to you whether you are not asking too much of me. You make this most hideous accusation against me; I deny it and propose a means of testing it privately; you first reject then accept the test, and then reject it again; and now you ask me to allow myself to lie quietly under a foul suspicion of this kind for an indefinite period while you take your own time to satisfy yourself that you have made an egregious blunder. I will do much, very much, for a friend of my Dora's—but do not you yourself think that this is asking too much? I am bound, in defence of my own honour, to request that you allow me to satisfy you at once of your mistake. I will propose another test. If you have private reasons for not exposing to your—to Mr. Cheriton—the reasons of your supposed acquaintance with this murderer, this Lesparde—these reasons which enable you to think you recognise him in me—then let us take another course." There was a suggestion of threat in this, and Dessie winced at it, as the man paused to give it expression before continuing. "Let us go together quietly, you and I alone, to Scotland Yard. There will be men there who will probably know quite well what has become of this man you seem to know, this Lesparde; and they will be able to at once point you out the mistake."

His eyes were rivetted on hers as he put this daring proposal—made with a double object: To seem absolutely sincere in his innocence, and to ascertain whether the reasons which kept Dessie from telling her lover would also keep her from telling the police—and when he saw her wince, he got up again with the same assumed readiness to start at once.

But a moment's rapid consideration sufficed to let the girl's quick wits see that though there were reasons why she would be unwise to go to the police with her story, it was absolutely impossible for him to go. It was a piece of bluff in which she felt she would be quite safe in out-bidding him. She sat silent a moment as if considering the suggestion, and then rising, said deliberately:—

"That seems to be a proof that would be conclusive; and, as you say, it can be obtained quite privately by us two alone. I will accept the offer. I will go and put on my hat, and will accompany you without loss of time. I quite see that it is unfair for me to leave this matter unprobed a minute longer than necessary."

"Certainly," he assented, without changing a muscle of his face; and he held the door open for her as she left the room to get ready. She was astonished and shaken by this; but she was not absent many minutes, and when she returned she found him ready with an excuse to flinch from the visit to the police.

"Something has recurred to me; and I fear it will be inexpedient for me to make this visit. A minute's reflection has caused me to take a much graver view of the matter. So much hangs upon the result to me that I cannot consent to keep it private merely to yourself and myself. Besides, when you come to think of it, it would be ridiculous to walk into Scotland Yard and say, 'This young lady thinks I am a French murderer; please convince her I am nothing of the kind.' They would laugh at us both and send us packing about our business to go and verify my identification in a proper way."

"I knew you didn't mean to go, even when you proposed it," said Dessie, curtly. "But your reason is not what you say, and you know that perfectly well."

"You make full use of your woman's privilege to say things a man dare not say," said her antagonist, angry because of the defeat. "I trust you will be as generous with your apologies when you know the truth as you have been with your sneers now."

"I know the truth already," retorted Dessie, sharply.

"Well, will you be good enough now to say what you propose to do? I have some engagements, but I am returning to this house again this afternoon. I am dining here again with Mrs. Markham. I shall then tell her what you have said, unless, indeed—and this will be the best course—you tell me how this strange idea originated. I can then, perhaps, dust away the whole cobweb."

"The knowledge is based on my own recognition of you. I myself know you to be the man I say."

"Is that the whole extent of your belief? A mistake in identity?"

"It is quite enough for me," returned Dessie, curtly. "The proofs will be easily forthcoming. I can put my hand on them."

"You are a difficult young woman to deal with; but I think I can see your motive, clever as it is. You wish to set Mrs. Markham against me. You are afraid that you will lose that control of her money which your present influence gives you. You start this cock and bull story about my being some French criminal in disguise—not because you believe it yourself and think there is the remotest atom of truth in the accusation, but for a very astute reason nevertheless. You calculate that it will induce your friend and patron to institute some kind of exhaustive investigation into my character, and you reckon that in such a case there may be discovered some one incident or other which you can twist and distort and magnify until in your clever white hands it will be enough

to separate us and allow you to keep your rich friend's riches for yourself." He paused, screwed up his eyes, and looked at the girl through the little slits.

"Well?" said Dessie, in a plain matter of fact tone.

"You are judging others—me, that is—by your own standard." Dessie could not wholly restrain a slight start at this unexpected thrust. "You have secrets in your life that you don't wish exposed to every prying eye—not even your lover's eye. You reckon that if that be so with a young girl beginning life like you, it is much more likely to be the case with a man half through with it, like me. Well, as it happens, you are almost wholly wrong. With ninety-nine men out of every hundred the searchlight, if powerful enough, would probably find an ugly spot somewhere capable of a very sinister interpretation. But I don't believe even your pretty ingenuity could do much harm with the facts you would find in my life. Certainly not of recent years. But, like most men"—here the intensity of his vigilant watch of her face seemed to increase—"I don't want such an inquiry, either for my sake or that of others. It would do no good to anyone—though it could do no harm to me."

"Well?" said Dessie, again, as he paused.

"You could do no good for yourself by it, Miss Merrion. You would not win in the end. You would not find sufficient to part Dora and me. I love her. She loves me. We conjugate every tense of every mood of the verb to love. More, she trusts me as I trust her. There is not an incident in all my life about which a word of explanation from me would not suffice to satisfy her. My heart tells me that. Therefore, you are bound to lose—lose her friendship, her patronage, her help, her money, everything. You must see that. You could not be the friend of a man and wife whom you had tried malignantly to part."

"I see that," said Dessie, when he paused again.

"Then let us three rather be good, firm, fast friends, as Dora herself would wish. It will be better worth your while to do that, don't you think? I will see that it is so, indeed."

"'Worth my while?' How do you mean?"

"I am frankness itself, and we are alone together. I do not wish to have these doubts poured into the ears of the woman I love and am to marry. For the sake of others, I would rather have no such inquiry. If, therefore, you agree to see this as I do, then, whatever you wish in reason, shall be done—after we are married."

A craftily-worded bribe, but the girl intended to make him speak plainly. She knitted her brows as if in thought, and then, after a pause, acting diffidence she said slowly and hesitatingly,

"How am I to know what you would do, and that you would really do it? I do not wish to make mischief unintentionally."

"You can name any sum that you would like to give to a charity up to five thousand pounds; and you shall have it."

There was no mistake now; and Dessie's honest heart beat with anger and her cheeks flushed with shame as she bent her head down to hide her face from him.

In the pause that followed, while the girl was fighting for sufficient composure to find some sort of reply, the door was opened quickly, and Mrs. Markham came bursting in upon them.

"I thought I'd give you a surprise," she cried, laughing. "You've been quite long enough together, too, I think, to get to know one another better. And I shall be jealous of you, Dessie, if you monopolise Godefroi longer. I hope you are getting on well?" And she looked a little

doubtfully into Dessie's flushed face, which bore unmistakable evidence of the girl's agitation.

"Miss Merrion and I have had a most interesting chat," said the Count, taking Dora's hands and kissing them both. "And we are getting to understand one another most completely. I am beginning to admire Miss Merrion's cleverness almost as much as you, my Dora; and I believe we shall be the closest of friends. But you are looking radiant, Dora; and I was afraid you were suffering and ill. Even illness cannot dim your eyes or pale your cheeks, or hide your beauty."

As Dessie watched her friend's face, she saw the cheeks colour with pleasure at this most fulsome compliment. She longed to speak out and tell all she knew, but feared to force a crisis at that instant and without further reflection as to her best line of action.

When she was silent, she caught the man's dark eyes fixed upon her with an expression of triumph.

CHAPTER V

A DARING ATTEMPT

Dessie was not to wait long before she had a startling and terrible proof of the desperate lengths to which her antagonist was prepared to go in prosecuting his scheme, and removing any obstacle that stood in his way.

The equivocal relations which the untimely arrival of Mrs. Markham produced between Dessie and the Count were too distasteful for her to suffer them to continue one unnecessary moment. She was not prepared to denounce him at once to her friend as Rolande Lespard; she was confident in her belief, but wished to be absolutely certain and to be in possession of proof. Nothing short of that would open the love-sealed eyes of her friend. But neither could she bring herself to allow the man to remain in the belief that she would take the disgusting bribe he offered for her silence.

It was not easy, however, to find an opportunity to speak to him alone. He did not remain long that morning; and as soon as he was gone Mrs. Markham plied her with questions, which Dessie found somewhat difficult to parry, as to what she and the Count had talked about in their long conversation.

"I am so glad you like him better," she said, when they had gone upstairs together and the widow was changing a dainty morning wrapper for a walking costume. "I was sure you would when you got to know

him better. He is the dearest and best fellow that ever lived. Don't you think so now?"

"You can't expect me to go so far as that, Dora."

"No, I don't want you to. But he is a dear fellow, isn't he?"

"Well, that is scarcely the epithet I should use either, said Dessie, with a smile.

"What epithet would you use then?"

"I don't know him thoroughly enough yet. I'll tell you more a week hence."

"By-the-bye, what were you doing with your hat on? You weren't going out?" asked the widow suddenly, with a sharp glance.

"I thought of going out; that's all," answered Dessie, indifferently.

"What, with the Count de Montalt? Where on earth were you going with him?"

"I did not say I was going with him, dear," answered Dessie, evasively, but hating the necessary evasion. "You know I'm accustomed to wait on myself and run on my own messages. It's nothing for me to pop my hat on and run to the post, and so on."

"I don't understand, Dessie. What could you want to run out to the post for in the middle of a conversation with Godefroi? What do you mean?"

"What a puzzled a face you have, dear. You're wrinkling it into a hundred and fifty frowns just because I took my hat downstairs instead of leaving it up in my room. I wish I could make it a little mystery for you. But there isn't one;" and she laughed and kissed her friend on the forehead. "And now, Dora, do you know, we must talk of something that is serious. I must go home, my dear. I have a heap of work waiting for me."

"But you can't go home to-day, nor to-morrow. I tell

you what I've been thinking. I want you to come and stop here for a few weeks. I'll have a little study fitted up for you—just where you like. No one shall interfere with you. You shall have your own hours for work, and a latchkey if you like—be a regular new woman, and when you can spare time give yourself to me. Do! Tom Cheriton can come and see you just as he does at your rooms. I should like him and Godefroi to be friends. Do come, Dessie. Stop till we're married. Do. Let us send up for all your belongings. But there, I shan't let you say no."

"I'll come for a time—a few days," said Dessie. It occurred to her that in this way she could the better carry out her plans. "But I won't say for how long. But I must go at once and make all the arrangements."

"You mean see Tom," laughed Mrs. Markham. "But you haven't told me a word yet of all that you and Godefroi talked about this morning. And I'm so jealous of you're having had him all to yourself for such a long time."

"I can't stop now. But you shall know every word as soon as I get a fit opportunity of telling you." And in this way Dessie escaped saying anything for the moment, and until she had had an opportunity of a talk over everything with her lover.

She left the house and hurried to her own rooms, where a great disappointment met her. A letter from Tom Cheriton, written hastily on the previous evening, told her that he had had to leave town.

"D. D. (this stood for "Dearest Dessie" in their language),—Our hearts are to be subjected to the awful strain of absence. A wire has just come saying that my uncle is ill, and wants me at once down at the Smokehole —you know where I mean, and how I love the place. But

I must go—sacrificing even my briefs. I don't suppose it's serious. I hope not. But the dear old fellow has been so good to me that I wouldn't disappoint him at any cost. I'll write you to-morrow from The Leas. If you write me very nice letters, I'll try and help forward that little partnership which we spoke of this afternoon. Ever as ever.—T. A. A.

" T. A. A." stood for " Tom All Alone," a Dickens reference which gave the pair of cheery lovers great pleasure.

But her lover's absence from town now was particularly unwelcome to Dessie. The trouble with the Count de Montalt, or Rolande Lespard, or whoever he might really be, placed her sadly in need of just that strong practical counsel which she knew Tom Cheriton could give her.

Her encounter with the man in the morning had left her less confident in her own strength and fighting power than she had been before. If she was right she had had infinitely the stronger weapons to fight with; and yet he had beaten her. Even when he was no more to her than a name and a threatening shadow, she had always had a sensation of fear of him and of the desperate lengths to which she believed him capable of going; and this fear made her unwilling to struggle with him single-handed.

She had intended to tell Tom at once and frankly all that she intended him to know about her past, so that they together, working in complete confidence, might expose the man and save Dora. Tom would have known what to do, she thought. But she could not write the secrets that would have to be whispered when her lips were close to his ear.

There was nothing for it but to wait, therefore—and delay must mean that she must either go on letting the

man believe her as vile as himself—willing to sell her best friend for a price—or run some personal risk by undeceiving him.

Without more than a minute's hesitation she chose the latter course. She would tell him at once that he was mistaken in her, and warn him to keep away from Dora. She resolved also to urge Tom Cheriton to come back as soon as possible; and made up her mind to go and stay at South Kensington until the crisis was over. She accordingly made all the necessary arrangements and packed such clothes, books, and papers as she would need for a stay of some weeks if necessary. The rest of her papers she locked in a little safe she had.

That done she wrote to her lover, telling him what she meant to do, and urging him to return to town as soon as possible, because there was a very important matter about Mrs. Markham's Count in which she wished to consult him. "I have made a discovery about him that frightens me; and I am at a loss to know quite what to do. I want your help and advice; and I don't want to get into trouble by making blunders, as, of course, you'll think I'm likely to do. If you want to save me from an ugly intrigue, hurry back."

Then she returned to South Kensington, hardening her resolve all the way, to tell the Count de Montalt what her intentions were. He must keep away from South Kensington until Tom's return, or she would tell Dora openly whom she believed him to be.

Chance helped her to an excellent opportunity of doing this. As she turned in at one end of Edgecumbe Square she saw the Count approaching from the other. She quickened her pace therefore, and passing the house met him.

"I should like one word with you," she said, curtly.

"A thousand if you will," he answered, raising his hat and bowing. "Shall we turn and walk, or would you like another appointment? I shall always be charmed to be a friend of yours now, Miss Merrion."

"I have not sought your friendship, thank you," said the girl, coldly, "and will not accept it. What I wish to say now is that I repudiate entirely the vile offer you made this morning to bribe me. I only let you speak without interruption so that I might know how far you would go. I have only this to say now: If you dare to come again to Mrs. Markham's house I will denounce you at once."

His face grew very stormy, and a heavy frown forced his black thick eyebrows together. But his voice was courteous and even as he answered:

"Do you mean that, unequivocally and absolutely? Is there no consideration will induce you to wait at least until I have an opportunity of getting proofs from France?"

"When you have them," said Dessie, contemptuously, "then by all means come. But not till then."

"You will live to repent this bitterly, Miss Merrion. You have put upon me a wholly undeserved disgrace; and if I accept your terms it is only because I wish to spare the woman who is to be my wife, and whom I love with all my heart, from the pain and sorrow which such a malignant accusation from a friend like yourself would cause her. I wish you had been as considerate. When we meet next, I shall have the proofs you want."

Then, to Dessie's intense surprise, he raised his hat, turned and walked away. She had not for an instant believed that this single stroke would have so immediate an effect. But when she saw him pass out of sight round the corner of the square her spirits rose, and as she ran

up the broad steps of Mrs. Markham's house she smiled in high glee.

"But a reaction soon set in, and Dessie began to fear that such a victory over such a man had been won too cheaply, and that this apparently weak compliance with her terms was only meant as a cover for some much stronger move.

And she soon had a terrible proof that this was so.

When the Count did not keep his appointment for that afternoon, Mrs. Markham was first impatient, then irritable, next nervous, and lastly full of anxiety lest some accident had occurred; and she passed quickly through these different moods. Dessie could not, of course, tell her what she knew the reason to be, and that in all probability the expected visitor would not come at all. But she was certainly unprepared for what happened.

After some two hours of waiting, in which Dora shed tears more than once, and seemed inclined to be hysterical, the Count was announced. He came in full of apologies to Mrs. Markham for the delay, and told copious untruths, as Dessie knew, about the cause of his lateness.

The widow was too excited and agitated by his arrival to pay any heed to the greeting between the other two. The man's nonchalant impudence was so complete that Dessie was at a momentary loss what to do, and before she had recovered herself, he was bending over her with a grave bow.

"I have brought the proofs," he whispered and then turned to speak again to Mrs. Markham.

He had scarcely arrived when afternoon tea was brought in, and with it came the young fellow who had long been in love with Dora, George Vezey. After greeting the Count in any but a cordial manner, he sat down

by Dessie and lapsed into a silence so unusual that the others rallied him upon the change.

The Count, on the other hand, was all lightness of speech, jest, and compliment; so much so that Dessie was sure he had some purpose to hide, and she watched him with quiet but unrelaxing vigilance.

Something in his manner made her very suspicious of him. Presently she noticed that while insisting upon handing her a cup of tea, he stood holding it for a moment with his back to her, while he finished telling a story he had begun, and he let the spoon fall, and had to stoop, with his back still towards Dessie, in order to pick it up and replace it on the saucer. It was only a little thing, but Dessie saw that he had dropped the spoon intentionally, and believed he had done it to get an opportunity to tamper with the tea.

She knew the man was an expert in poisons; and instantly she resolved not to drink a drop of it. She stirred it slowly, pretended to taste it, and made a wry face.

"My dear Dora, what have you done with my tea? You are so excited, you have given me yours. It is all sugar. It will just suit you. Give me yours."

"Very well, dear. Give it me."

"Allow me," said the Count, quickly going to Dessie, and holding out his hand for the cup.

"Thank you, don't trouble. I am going to change my chair," answered Dessie, coolly, trying to keep the cup from him.

"Pardon me, I cannot allow that; it is a trouble," he replied, and pushing forward, he deliberately took the cup and saucer from her, and then, as if in confusion, let them drop with a crash to the ground, uttering loud apologies and expressions of regret for his clumsiness.

A glance showed Dessie that though the cup was

broken, and most of the tea spilt, there was yet enough left in the fragment of the cup, and in the saucer, for the purpose of analysis, to confirm or dissolve her suspicions.

"Oh, Dora, it is my favourite cup," she cried, and stooping took the larger half of the broken cup, poured into it what tea remained in the saucer, and, without waiting to say more, hurried with it out of the room. As she was passing the Count, he made a quick movement, as if to strike the cup from her hand, under the pretence of assisting her, but she avoided him, and as she glanced into his face their eyes met, and he knew that she had discovered his daring attempt to poison her, and was escaping with the proofs of his guilt.

She knew now well enough why he had ventured to return to the house, and why he had seemed to yield so readily when they had met in the Square.

He had been to fetch the drug which he needed for the attempt on her life.

CHAPTER VI

A RECKLESS ENEMY

THE incident had happened so suddenly, passed so quickly, and arisen out of such a commonplace circumstance, that until Dessie was alone in her own room she did not realise fully that she had actually had a most narrow escape of losing her life.

The simple manner in which the attempt had been made, its consummate daring, and the audacity of endeavouring to poison her in a cup of tea given so openly before her friends, filled her with such intense astonishment, that she could only marvel at her assailant's recklessness.

But astonishment soon gave way to fear. The man who would dare such an attempt would dare anything; and Dessie longed earnestly for Tom Cheriton's return, and began to regret that she had taken her first step in his absence. She was no match for this murderer, and as she sat and eyed the broken fragile cup, with its few drops of what she believed to be a subtle poison, she grew almost afraid to be alone, and trembled and glanced about her nervously, as if expecting an attack even in her own room.

It was some minutes before she could shake off her agitation and regain any degree of self-possession. Then she emptied the contents of the cup into a small bottle, and this she carefully hid lest anyone should take it away in mistake.

After that she washed out the cup, placed it on the table that had been arranged for her writing materials, and then returned to the small drawing-room in which the incident had occurred.

"Whatever is the matter with you to-day, child?" said Mrs. Markham, as she entered. "You've been doing all sorts of curious things."

"I suppose it must be the effect of Tom's absence," answered the girl, with a smile.

"Or the result of being introduced to de Montalt," said George Vezey. "People do all sorts of odd things after they've been introduced to him." This with a glance at Mrs. Markham. "I believe you have the evil eye, Count, or some such beastly thing as that."

"That is a very unpleasant as well as a very stupid thing to say, George," said Mrs. Markham, annoyed by this; but the Count laughed good humouredly and easily. He did not care a rap for the young fellow's temper; indeed he rather enjoyed it. It was not in any way likely to interfere with his plans; so he could afford to be tolerant of the other's temper.

The relations between Mrs. Markham and young Vezey were naturally strained just now. Till the Count's coming they had been virtually engaged. Vezey was good-looking, fair, slim, and well-tailored; and he rather affected the effeminate manner of a young fellow about town. But in Dessie's opinion there was more affectation than effeminacy about him; and she liked him, and believed him to be much more capable than his surface manner suggested.

Mrs. Markham had been in the habit of making use of him for all conceivable purposes; and he had taken a genuine pleasure in dancing attendance upon her everywhere, and in helping her in the thousand and one ways

in which an attentive man can help the woman he loves to get the most enjoyment out of life.

But the promotion of de Montalt had changed his view of things altogether. Vezey found himself deposed from his position, and took the change in very ill part, disliking the Count proportionately. Nothing irritated him more than for Dora to take the other man's part against him.

He let the matter pass now, however, with nothing more antagonistic than an angry glance at de Montalt, who smiled more broadly as he saw it. The relations between three out of the four were thus ruffled, and the conversation lagged rather heavily until the two men left the house, to which they were to return later to dine.

After dinner the Count and George Vezey stayed so long over their wine and cigars that Mrs. Markham grew impatient; and when they came into the drawing-room Vezey went and sat by Dessie at one end of the long room, in one of the large bay windows.

"I hate that chappie, Miss Merrion, don't you?" he said, soon after he joined her. "I believe he's an awful bounder, and I can't for the life of me think what she sees in him. Can you?"

"Why did you introduce him?" asked Dessie.

"Why was I an idiot, you mean? The questions are about the same in different forms. The truth is he got me out of a scrape I was a fool ever to get into. I was over in Antwerp with a rowdy American I picked up in the playrooms at Ostend, and in the course of things we got into a beastly street row. Before you could say Tommyrot, a lot of beastly-looking sailor chappies were round us, and more than one bally knife was out of its sheath. I was in a ghastly funk, I'll own, and would have given five pounds for the sight of a police Johnnie. Then this Count fellow bang slangs into the middle of the

whole show, and before the beggars with the knives quite knew what was happening, he had waltzed us out of the mess, and into a place of safety. I'm bound to say he's a plucky Johnnie, and awfully handy with his fists. He floored two or three of the beggars in ripping style."

"You shouldn't get into such places," laughed Dessie. "I'm bound to say it served you right. You're not to be trusted."

"That's all right, I know. And if I could have paid the fellow a reward—a fiver, or two or three of them, for that matter—I shouldn't have cared. But he's not the sort of man you can offer coin to, don't you know, is he? Well, he froze to me, as ill luck would have it, and when he knew I was staying at Ostend, nothing would please him but that he should come over to the same place. And then, what the dickens was I to do? How could I help it? I had to introduce him. He did the rest himself. But I'd rather have had one of those beggars' knives stuck into me than what's happened." He spoke quite savagely.

"But do you mean really that you know no more of the Count than you have told me, Mr. Vezey?"

"Not a syllable, except a lot of gas he himself has blown off about his estates, and family, and connections, and a lot more rot of that sort."

"And does Dora know how little you know?"

"Oh she's got no eyes for anything but his face, and no ears except for his sickening compliments. I could kick the fellow when I hear them."

"Why don't you, then?" said Dessie, quietly.

"What good would it do? I should get a bally hiding, and be shut out of this house for my pains."

"And what do you yourself really think of him?"

"That he's a bounder, or worse. 'Pon my soul, I'm sometimes afraid of what I do think about him. He does such devilish odd things. Here's an instance to-night, even. After you two had left the table, we sat smoking cigarettes for a couple of minutes, and then he began to chaff me about all sorts of rot; and at last about my not being able to smoke strong cigars. He riled me: He always does. His manner's enough to do that, to tell the truth. He seems to rub my hair the wrong way; and I let him run on, till he bet me a fiver I couldn't smoke one of his cigars with him at a sitting without leaving my chair to be sick. Of course I took him on. A fiver's a fiver, to say nothing of the pleasure of winning it from him."

"Well?" asked Dessie, showing more interest in the incident than her companion expected.

"We lighted up, each taking a weed from his case—and strong ones they were, too, I'll own—and puffed away. But before we'd been a couple of minutes at that game he put his hand to his heart, or his throat, or somewhere, and said he felt queer, and must get a box of lozenges from his great coat. I told him one of the servants could get it or bring him his coat; but that wouldn't suit him it seemed, and he went out of the room saying he'd be back in a minute. He was twenty minutes gone, if he was a second. I'd nearly finished the great black cigar he gave me when he came back; so I know how long he was. His, by the way, was scarcely touched. He said he hadn't brought the lozenges he wanted, and had been out to buy them. But his face looked as black and angry as his dress coat, and he muttered something or other about not being well, and he seemed awfully excited. When I asked him why he hadn't been smoking his cigar, he first swore, and then

said I was an idiot; that he had finished his first cigar, and that was his second. But I didn't believe him, though what the deuce he'd been doing I don't know."

His hearer had a shrewd guess, but didn't express it. Instead of that she laughed and asked—

"Did he give you the 'fiver,' Mr. Vezey?"

"Yes, with some sort of rubbish about it being the cheapest and yet dearest five pounds' worth he had ever bought; I don't know what he meant."

After this answer Dessie turned the subject, and chatted about some other matters. George Vezey's thoughts were, however, all tinged with one colour—regret for having lost Mrs. Markham—and he was soon back to the same theme; but before he had been long indulging his lament, Dessie made an excuse and left him.

She could not wait any longer to verify the suspicion that had occurred to her, as to the object of the man's absence from the dinner table.

She ran up to her room, feeling much excited.

A glance at the place confirmed her suspicions. Someone had been there, turning over her things.

When she had dressed for dinner she had left everything in order. The luggage from her own rooms had been brought to the house, and she had unpacked before dressing The books and the papers she had put back into one of the boxes—a strong iron box of German make, with a peculiar key and fastening—and the clothes and hats she had placed away in the wardrobe and drawers. She had also taken pains to set out the little table which had been placed for her writing in one of the windows. On this her writing materials lay ready—a large blotting pad which she always used and a folding desk slope.

At the right hand side of the slope close to the window she had left the broken cup.

It was gone.

Many of the things in the room had been turned over and disarranged. The drawers, in which everything had been laid tidily, had evidently been hurriedly searched, and an attempt made to put the contents back so that a superficial observation might not detect that they had been disturbed.

But to Dessie, knowing what she did, the trail of the searcher was easy to follow.

She rang the bell and questioned the maid who had charge of the room. She knew the girl well, and liked her.

"Martin, I broke a teacup, and brought it up here, I think, so that it could be kept. Have you seen it? I am almost sure I left it on the writing table when I went down to dinner."

"I saw it when I brought you some hot water, Miss, and when I was helping you to put your things away, and afterwards when you were dressing. But I don't know exactly where you put it. I didn't see it when I came up afterwards to light the gas and make the room ready."

"When was that, Martin?"

"I was very late to-night, Miss. I'd only been down about five minutes or so when you rang the bell now."

"Then I must have taken it down myself without thinking about it. I suppose none of the other servants would be likely to take it away, thinking it was put out to be thrown away as it was broken?"

"No one comes into the room except myself, Miss."

"You're quite certain of that?"

"Quite positive, Miss, quite," said the girl, emphatically.

"Well, of course, it's of no consequence whatever," said Dessie, pleasantly. "Only I wanted to see whether I could really be so foolish as to mean to do one thing with it and then do another. And it's quite clear I did."

"Is there anything else, Miss?" asked the maid.

"Nothing, thank you." But when the girl had closed the door behind her and gone Dessie's face grew very grave. There might be some gap in the evidence, but she was content with it and accepted it as proof that her antagonist had left his companion at the dinner table, after securing that he would stop there by making the bet with him, and had then come to her room to search for the cup containing the remnant of the poison, so that he could destroy the traces of his deed. And the frown which George Vezey had said darkened his face on his return was caused by his failure.

The bottle into which Dessie had poured the few drops of poisoned tea was a small one, and in her hurry she had thrust it right into the middle of the bed between the mattresses. She felt for it now, and a smile of triumph lighted her face as she pulled it out and held it up to the gaslight to examine it.

But as she turned to lock it away a fresh thought occurred to her. If this man meant still to try and get possession of the bottle, had she not better hide it instead of merely locking it up? This suggested to her that she should examine her locked box very closely, to ascertain whether it had been opened.

A scrutiny of the lock showed her nothing, nor when she unfastened it could she be more certain. She had put the books and papers into it in a great hurry without any method, while she was not quite certain what papers she had brought with her. But the contents were jumbled together in a manner which left it quite an open

question whether or not they had been tampered with in the same manner as the things in the drawers, and as a result the girl determined not to put the poison there, but to find some secure hiding-place for it somewhere in the house.

This resolve alone showed how great and growing was her fear of the man who was thus proving himself so daring an antagonist. This fear was uppermost in her mind as she walked uneasily up and down the room, thinking closely what ought to be her next step in the struggle with the dangerous man who was ready to go to such desperate lengths against her in defence of his purpose.

For the moment she was literally afraid to expose him; and when she went downstairs again it was with the resolve to say nothing that night, but to wire the first thing in the morning to Tom to come at once to London and help her to right matters. At the same time she resolved to have the poison analysed.

As soon as she opened the drawing-room door, the Count's eyes fell on her, and she seemed to read in his face that he had guessed the object of her absence from the room and what she had discovered.

Five minutes later a manœuvre of his had brought Dora and George Vezey together at one end of the room; and then making an excuse he crossed directly to Dessie, who shuddered as he approached.

"I want you to see this view, Miss Merrion, and let me tell you what happened here," he said. He was holding a photograph in his hand and spoke loud so that the others could hear. But as soon as he was by the girl's side, he dropped his voice, and said quietly, and as though he was describing some incident connected with the photograph.

"I know where you have been, and why. You think you have made a discovery. I know that I have. Be careful what you do. I know you now, and will speak to you to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, at the farther end of the Square, near Cromwell Road. We must understand one another, you and I, and be friends, or it is you, not I, will suffer. Be warned in time. I will give you the proofs you want, together with some others you don't want"—this, with a pause and a smile of infinite cunning and menace—"to-morrow morning. Yes, just at that point," he broke off, speaking in another tone, as Mrs. Markham came towards the pair, in pursuit of him, to hear what he had to say to Dessie, "he hung there for two hours," and in a light airy manner he continued the description of an imaginary incident, speaking in a manner that suggested he had been relating it to Dessie before Mrs. Markham joined them.

But the girl herself was thinking not of that, but of the challenge which she read in his words, and looked so grave that Mrs. Markham rallied her upon being scared by the Count's story.

CHAPTER VII

"I WANT TO KNOW ALSO WHO YOU ARE"

"It's my belief you've been overworking yourself, Dessie," said Mrs. Markham, when the two sat chatting together alone before going to bed. "You're not a bit yourself and you look worried and almost scared to death; or else your illness has left you much weaker than you think."

"No, there's nothing the matter with me," replied Dessie, smiling. "Of course the fever did pull me down, but I'm better. Tom will have it that I've not picked up my strength yet; but then he's such a ridiculous fidget. Men are."

"He's right now, I'm afraid. I sha'n't let you do much work here, mind; I won't have it," and Dora shook her head as though laying down the law, while she smiled very kindly. Then another thought occurred to her, and she took one of the girl's hands in hers and pressed it. "I suppose there's no other worry, is there? Now, tell me the truth—no money bothers? You know that one of the only pleasures this money of mine gives me is to let me be useful sometimes." The light in her eyes was very gentle, and her face very compassionate as she put this question.

"No, certainly not. Why, only a couple of weeks ago I sold a serial. I have actually a balance in the bank; to say nothing of quite a lot of money that is owing to me."

"Then what is it? There's nothing wrong between

Tom and you, is there? Nothing that has made him go off in this way. I'm so happy, I can't bear to see you like this."

"Dear old Tom. No." exclaimed Dessie, a blush and a smile breaking out all over her face as she spoke. "Why, it was only an hour or two before I got your wire that we were having the cosiest of cosy chats over a cup of tea in my rooms, and half inclined to be jealous of you because we said you were likely to be married before us."

"Then what is it?" asked Dora, after a pause, and looking straight into her friend's face. "There's something, Dessie. I've been looking at you a dozen times to-day, and each time the worried look has seemed to increase. Have you any other kind of trouble?"

"Nothing that concerns myself; and nothing that I shan't be able to tell you in a day or so," said the girl.

"Why not now? The time is never too soon for a confidence."

"Why not now?" repeated Dessie, lapsing then into silence, as she weighed whether she would or not tell Dora what her real suspicions of the Count were. She longed to warn her and put her on her guard, but she could not help feeling that to do that without having the actual proof would do little good, and might do harm. If the evidence was not sufficient to at once convince the widow that her lover was really a scoundrel, she would be all the harder to convince in the end. Her faith must be broken at one blow, or it would survive a gradual assault.

"Why not now?" repeated Mrs. Markham very softly, pressing her companion's hand.

"No, not yet," answered Dessie. "I—I must have a little more time."

"Is it anything—anything about Godefroi? Don't you

really like him any better than you did?" She asked the question almost wistfully, rather like a child.

"I have not seen much more of him. Except this morning you have monopolised him the greater part of the time he has been in the house."

Mrs. Markham looked at her friend intently in silence for a few moments, then she sighed.

"He likes you, Dessie," she said at length, "but he seems to understand that you dislike him. He is the most generous and sincere of good fellows, and he has told me how much it grieves him that you, one of my best friends, should seem to both distrust and dislike him. Have you said anything to him about this? Don't try and part us, dear. Try rather to like him. He is afraid you want to separate us, and he told me to-night it would break his heart and ruin his life if anything were to come between us. I couldn't give him up. Nothing should ever make me. Don't try, Dessie. Don't for heaven's sake. I love your friendship and hold it deep in my heart. But don't ever force me to choose between friendship and love. Promise me you'll never do that. Promise me!"—and she threw her arms round Dessie and kissed her, having spoken with a quite impetuous vehemence.

"I can promise you faithfully, my dear," answered the girl steadily, "that I will never ask you to choose between your friendship for me and your love for the Count de Montalt."

Dora, in whose eyes the ready tears were standing, lifted her head and looked through them at her companion. Then she dashed the tears hastily away as if they interfered with her scrutinising the girl's face.

"I don't like that tone," she said. "It sounds hard and without heart, not a bit like you. What has passed

between you and Godefroi to-day? Will you tell me? Something serious, I'm sure."

Dessie was silent. The elder woman put her face close to the girl's, and stared eagerly and almost fiercely into it with an expression which her next question explained.

"Have you ever met him before? Do you know anything about him—about him and any other woman? Are you keeping anything from me? Dessie, you mustn't do that," she said with intense earnestness. "Mark me, I don't care what there is to know about other women. Men are not saints, and nothing short of an actual legal bar between us should ever keep Godefroi and me apart. I love him with all my soul, and if ever man loved woman he loves me. I want no more than that, and the knowledge makes me almost mad in my happiness. You can tell me anything. Let the past be what it may and as black as it may, the future he will keep white for love of me. Don't try to part us, Dessie. You can't do it."

"He has been talking to you till he has excited you, Dora," said Dessie, still very quietly and firmly. "What I said last night, I say to-night. If he be what you think him, the marriage will have no heartier well-wisher than I."

"Yes," answered her companion, impatiently and almost angrily. "But there is something behind that 'if'; and when you say it I turn chill, and almost fear you, for the possibility of parting it suggests. Do you know, Dessie, I believe I could hate even you if you tried to come between us."

Then she got up hastily out of her chair and began to walk about the room; and Dessie thought it best not to answer. Soon afterwards they both went upstairs to bed; the girl realising more completely than she had yet

done how strong and deep was the man's grip on her friend's life.

As soon as she was alone in her room she found her nerves were really unstrung. She was full of apprehensive fancies and fears. She seemed to picture the man as he might have glided about the room that evening when searching for the poison and hunting among her things. The picture which her thoughts had painted for her of that other grim search of his in the Pyrenean homestead, when his thoughts were busy with the purpose of murder, also came back to her now; and she glanced about the room as if calculating how it would adapt itself to such a purpose if he were to come there to kill her.

She was so fearsome that she examined every nook and cranny of the room—under the bed, in the wardrobe, in the cupboards, even in the large drawers, everywhere where a man could possibly or impossibly hide. When she had satisfied herself that no one was in the room but herself she locked the doors and fastened the window; and then fortified all three by placing things in such a position that anyone opening either door or window would be sure to make sufficient noise to wake a sleeper. And when at length she got into bed, she left the gas burning high enough for her to detect the slightest change in the position of anything.

All this was absolutely foreign to her custom, but the shock of the afternoon's attempt had unhinged her. She could not sleep. As often as she dozed she fell into some troubled dream from which she would wake up full of nervous dread, and more than once in a clammy sweat of fear.

Nothing occurred to substantiate the fears which spoilt her night's rest; and when daylight came she fell asleep with a feeling of profound thankfulness.

She rose the next morning comparatively unrefreshed, of course, and with a splitting headache; and though she could laugh in the daylight at her fears, and make fun to herself of the elaborate preparations of the night before, she knew that many such nights would have serious consequences to her health. But her mind was soon absorbed by thoughts of the appointment with de Montalt, and of what she had to do before it.

Mrs. Markham was going to breakfast in her room, the maid told her, and this set Dessie free pretty early. Her first task was to take the little bottle of poisoned tea to have it analysed; and she started as soon as she had finished her breakfast. After that she hurried on to her rooms to get what letters there might be—she knew there would be one from Tom Cheriton—and as soon as she had them she had no time to read them before starting on her return journey to South Kensington to be in time for her appointment with the Count.

She travelled back by the Underground Railway and read her lover's letter as she threaded her way through the squares to Gower Street Station, and finished it and the rest in the train. Tom's letter was a long one for him—cheery and bright and loving as usual; but holding out no hope of an early return. His uncle, Samuel Davenant, was really ill this time, he said. Not dangerously but lingeringly ill; and he was altogether loath to let Tom out of his sight. "I think it would have been a jolly good move if I'd brought you down here with me," wrote Tom, "and just let him see what a natty little beggar you can be when you choose. If those little white fingers of yours had been busy making my poor old uncle comfortable, instead of dipping into other people's pies, I fancy it might have been a deal better for you both, to say nothing of me. I hope, by the way, that

you're not getting your fingers too deep into that mess; but I suppose I shall hear. Anyway, you'll have to manage without me for a time—and perhaps a long time. Oh! how I wish you were here."

Dessie smiled at the last sentence, but frowned rather wearily at that which said he was to be away a long time. Then she reflected that by then he would have her letter explaining that matters had taken a turn; and she hoped that in consequence he might be able to get away and come to her.

There were three other letters. Two on business about work—some fiction and some articles that had to be written—while the third was in a handwriting she did not at first recognise. She looked it over in that ridiculous way in which people do turn over letters in a strange or forgotten handwriting; but when she opened and read it a deep flush mantled in her cheeks, and an angry light brightened her eyes. It was short.

"My dearest Dessie,

"Don't start with anger when you see how I address you. You can never be anything else to me than dearest. I have been seeking you a very long time and have only just now found your address. That indeed has been almost by an accident. But I shall call and see you tomorrow morning and tell you of the deep, deep love that has been growing and strengthening in my heart ever since we parted years ago under circumstances I am now ashamed to recall.

"Ever your devoted friend,

"Edmund Landale."

It was from the man of whose abominable treatment of her years before she had told Dora, when warning her how utterly contemptible and base some men could be; and as Dessie read the letter and thought of the past and

of the man's conduct her heart was full of both bitterness and foreboding. He knew much, and was scoundrel enough to use his knowledge for her harm.

The knowledge that he was coming again into her life was galling and disheartening; and all the time she was in the train she sat brooding unhappily over the possible complications and troubles that might be the result to her.

Now more than ever she fretted at her lover's absence from London, and regretted she had not already told him what had to be told. She needed his strength; the comforting assurance of his love and above all the certainty that what had to be told would make no difference in his feelings for her. Her present mood made her take the darkest and gloomiest views of everything. Though there was nothing in the past disgraceful to herself, yet there were undoubtedly certain things which any man must hear with great regret and which many a man would regard as serious obstacles to making her his wife.

She felt as sure of Tom Cheriton as a woman could be of a generous true fellow who loved her with all his heart. She had once felt sure of this contemptible scoundrel, Landale; and Tom also had to look to his position, and—but at that point she broke off the thread of this thought to scold herself for harbouring even an implied suspicion of her lover's loyalty. But for all that she could not be quite easy.

If only he had been in town that morning she would have gone to him there and then and told him everything without reserve.

Out of this came an impulse. She would send off the telegram she had thought of the previous night in her moment of panic; and as soon as she left the South

Kensington Station she did so, urging him to run up to her at once, if only for an hour or so, as something most serious had occurred.

The sense that that message would bring him to her help within a few hours calmed her agitation somewhat; but Sir Edmund Landale's letter was altogether the worst possible preparation which she could have had for the interview with the Count de Montalt, and she was very nervous and unstrung as she walked along the Cromwell Road, and on nearing the short street leading to the square caught sight of his tall powerful figure waiting for her.

"You are not looking at all well, Miss Merrion," was his greeting, as he looked keenly into her face—he did not now attempt to shake hands. "You are not fitted for work of this kind."

"I have not come to discuss my looks, but to hear what you wish to say to me," said Dessie, coldly.

"I admire your courage; but at the same time the fact that you have thought it wise to come shows me you can temper it with a shrewd discretion."

"I have no wish to bandy words or terms with you. The reason for our meeting is this. I told you yesterday I should tell Mrs. Markham what I knew about you if you went again to the house without giving me proofs that you are not the man I say. You did go again to the house, and said that you had the proofs with you. Instead of producing them, you made a dare-devil attempt to poison me. I have sent the poisoned tea to be analysed, so that there may be no mistake on that score. You then made a desperate endeavour to get possession of the poison by stealing up like a thief into my room, and ransacking every nook and cranny. You failed; but even then, unabashed, you had the hardihood to tell me you

knew I had discovered your actions, but that you would meet me this morning and give me the proofs you had before said you could produce—proofs that you are the Count de Montalt, and not Rolande Lespard, the murderer of old Paul Duvivier."

"You have an excellent faculty of direct speech, Miss Merrion," said the man, with a sneer. "A trick of journalism, I suppose."

"Please be good enough to keep to the unpleasant subject that has made this meeting necessary," interrupted Dessie, curtly.

"That is just the point which you have missed. But to do you justice, I am not sure that you quite know what that is. If you remember, I promised you something more than the proofs you wanted." He stopped, and looked at her with an indescribably evil smile. "Ugh? You remember now?"

The girl waved her hand in deprecation.

"No, it is not unimportant," he said, in answer to the gesture. "It is most important. It means no less than that this interview may end in your arrest, Miss Merrion. Your arrest on a most serious charge. You want to know who I am, and will not believe that I am what I say. I want also to know who you are, and why you stole jewels worth thousands of pounds five years ago, and have made no effort to restore them. Stole them from a waiting-room at the Birmingham station on the 14th of March, 1887."

For all his strange career and experiences, Dessie was a far better actor than he; and though now taken infinitely by surprise, she held her feelings splendidly in check, and answered in a deliberate tone and calculating manner, as though recalling facts from her memory.

"The fourteenth of March—the fourteenth of March,

I am not surprised you have that date well in your thoughts. That was the day when you were arrested for the murder of Paul Duvivier, on the very spot you mention—the platform of Birmingham station."

By the time she had finished her sentence, she had recovered her composure. The danger of the crisis quickened her wits, and she looked at him coldly and sternly, as she added:

"Why do you tell me this? I see in it no proof that you are not old Duvivier's murderer. On the contrary, it only shows that I am right about you."

CHAPTER VIII

AN OMINOUS MEETING

NEVER in all her life had Dessie Merrion had greater need of all her pluck and shrewdness than at the moment when she stood facing the Count de Montalt, forcing down her fears and anxieties, and thinking eagerly what course she should take and whether she should admit or deny her possession of the jewels.

If she denied it, then her knowledge of his identity had no substantial foundation; if she admitted it, he would have possibly as great a power over her as she had over him. She was altogether ignorant as to what the effect to her might be of having kept the rubies. It was certain that she had not stolen them. She believed the two letters she had received from the woman whose bag she had taken in mistake would clear her of that charge certainly; but how far she was justified in retaining possession of them, and whether she could be punished for having done so, she did not know.

But she had now to choose her course in ignorance of the consequences; and yet having once taken it she might have to stick to it through thick and thin; and the difficulty of choice puzzled, and indeed for the moment baffled and bewildered her.

All these considerations flashed through her thoughts as she stood facing her antagonist and waiting for him to answer; while she was conscious that the keen dark eyes were searching her face to guess her thoughts.

"This promises to be an exceptionally interesting conversation," he said, after a minute's pause. "Exceptionally interesting. Shall we walk on? Standing looking at one another in this way is just a little melodramatic, don't you think?"

They moved on at this and after another short pause he added—

"Now you'll understand what I meant last night when I said that you and I had better understand one another. I have a considerable admiration for many of your qualities, Miss Merrion—though of course my knowledge of your connection with this jewel robbery must influence me when I come to think of you as a friend of my future wife. But we can talk of that another time. That is of the future. I want to speak of the present. What are you going to do? Are you going to force me to take the unpleasant step of revealing my knowledge to Mrs. Markham, and leaving you to make such explanation as you please? Or shall we let things go on as they were, before I made this discovery? I am not so harsh and peremptory as you were yesterday, you see. Willing rather to screen you if possible."

"I am not going to stoop to ask you what you mean when you insult me in this way about some discovery that you pretend to have made about me. I have come to meet you to get the proofs of your identity—something to satisfy me you are not Rolande Lespard; and in place of these you hatch up this story."

"Then I shall be under the painful necessity of informing either Mrs. Markham or the police, or both, that you are a young lady of very questionable antecedents, one of whose exploits undoubtedly was to be concerned in the robbery of very valuable jewels in March, five years ago."

Dessie smiled at this as she answered,

"I am not much disposed to think that you will go any nearer to a policeman than you are obliged. But please yourself. I have made up my mind in this matter. I have wired this morning to ask Mr. Cheriton to come up to London at once, and I shall then lay the whole facts before him. Till then I shall do nothing. After then, you can do what you please. I have no more to say, and as you have not done what you said should be done at this interview, I prefer not to prolong it." With that she turned away abruptly, and left him, without giving him time to reply.

Her one thought, desire and policy now was to see Tom, and tell him everything.

The Count stood and stared after her in anger and astonishment at her sudden decision; and at first he made a step or two as if to follow her. But he checked himself, and turned away, thinking rapidly.

"If the two once get together before I have completed such a case as I can make up against her, I shall be beaten," he muttered to himself. "It's all gone splendidly up to now—up to the time of this sharp-eyed, keen-witted, plucky little beggar coming in to spoil everything. I'll do as I thought—go to her rooms, and ransack the place—see what I can find." With that he hailed a hansom, and told the man to drive fast to the address of Dessie Merrion's rooms.

There, a little impudence, a lie or two, and a tip imposed upon the woman housekeeper, so that he gained admission to the girl's three rooms. He said that she was coming back directly to meet him, and had given him the key of the rooms. He produced a card of hers, on which he had pencilled, in writing meant to resemble

hers, an instruction to let the bearer wait in the rooms. When the key he produced would not fit the lock, he made an excuse to the woman that Dessie had obviously given him the wrong one; whereupon, she opened the door for him.

"Miss Merrion didn't tell me as you was coming, sir, not when she was here for her letters jes' now; leastways a hour or so ago. But I suppose it's all right."

"My good woman, do I look as if it could be all wrong?" asked de Montalt, and his handsome looks, fashionably cut clothes, and pleasant smile quite disarmed her. "If you'd feel more comfortable to see me sitting on the stairs, and whistling, instead of in this very comfortable armchair, I've no objection. I'll do anything to oblige so manifestly kind and pleasant a lady as yourself. But personally, I prefer the chair;" and he smiled again, in a way that convinced the woman there could be no guile behind it. Then, as she was leaving the room, he added, to give the matter an added touch of genuineness, "By the way, if a gentleman calls before Miss Merrion should get here—it's a rather important business matter that we're to meet about—you'd better let him come up at once."

"Very well, sir, said the woman, the smile on the man's face broadening as the door closed behind her.

He sat still, listening to her footsteps go down the staircase, and then opening the door very quietly, he put his head out, and listened more intently still. He heard her moving about in the lower part of the house; and then he closed the door again, shot the bolt on the inside, and set vigorously to work on the task which he had come to accomplish.

Less than half an hour's rapid but most systematic

search convinced him that he had better concentrate his attention on the safe, and that there was little or nothing of any consequence to be found outside it.

One sharp glance at the safe told him that it would not give him much trouble. It was a cheap, well-painted thing got up to sell and called burglar-proof. But the plates were little thicker than sheet tin, while the vulnerable spots to those who know where to look for them were many. And the Count de Montalt knew well enough.

"I could open this thing with an oyster knife, even if I couldn't pick the lock with a bent nail," he said to himself with a contemptuous laugh when he had examined it closely; and after some half hour's ingenious work he succeeded in picking the lock.

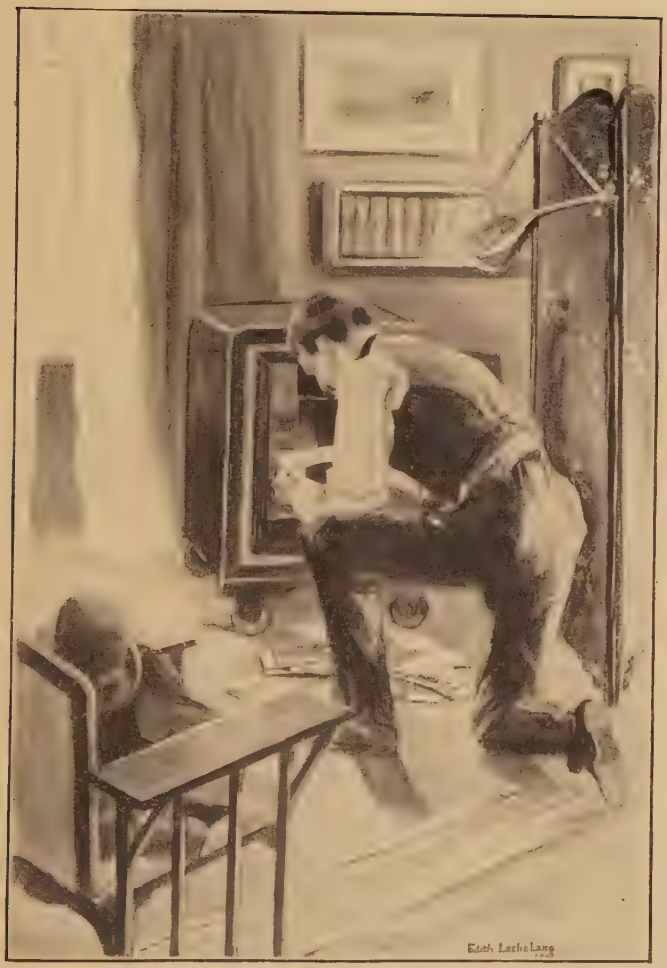
He commenced instantly to overhaul its contents; and taking them out he went through them very carefully. What he found interested him deeply and more than once as he read some of the papers and glanced at the nature of others, he smiled in self-congratulation at his discoveries.

He was completely absorbed in the work, and he thus started violently when some one rapped smartly at the door, tried the handle, and then, finding it locked, knocked again.

"Can this be the girl; **or — I hope not —** that blustering lover of hers, Cheriton?" he said to himself in alarm. "If it is there'll be a scrimmage in all probability."

While he was thinking he was also acting quickly. He bundled all the unimportant papers back into the safe, and closed the door; thrust a few into the pocket of his coat, which he put on again quickly, removed as many traces of his work as possible, and then sat down in the arm chair, and waited for the knock to be repeated.

When it came again, he yawned very loudly, got up



He commenced instantly to overhaul its contents.

and opened the door, with the expression on his face as if he had just awoke, while his hand concealed a smothered yawn.

"Beg your pardon. Hope you haven't been knocking long. But the truth was I got tired waiting and dropped off into a snooze." As he spoke he was eyeing very keenly the new comer, a middle-sized, dapper-looking, well-groomed man, who seemed considerably astonished at his reception.

"Wonder who the devil you are," was de Montalt's inward comment. "Won't you come in?" he asked, seeing the man hesitate.

"Are not these Miss Merrion's rooms?" asked the visitor.

"Not the lover, evidently," thought the Count much relieved, as he replied aloud, "Of course they are. She'll be here in a minute or two. Come in. She should be here now, only you know what women's punctuality is. I expect you're the man she said was coming," and he held out his hand for the card which he saw in the other's hand. "Oh! Landale—Sir Edmund Landale—yes, of course. Well, I don't know whether that was the name she said. Oh! yes, Landale, of course," as some references in the papers he had just been reading flashed across his thoughts.

"I wrote and said I should be here this morning."

"The devil you did," thought his hearer; "then I wonder if she's coming back to meet you." But aloud he replied—"Yes, I know. Well, I am absolutely in her confidence now, and whatever you have to say may as well be said through me, Sir Edmund."

The baronet looked infinitely surprised at this, and his feeling found expression in a long stare which the other man met with a bland and courteous expression.

"Do you mean that Miss Merrion told you the purport of my letter, Mr.—Mr.—I didn't catch your name?"

"No. I haven't mentioned it. De Montalt, my name is—the Count de Montalt. I daresay you know it."

"No, I never heard it. But may I ask what relation you stand in toward Miss Merrion?"

"Well, I am afraid that that would be a little difficult to explain," was the very truthful answer, continued untruthfully. "You can judge pretty well that as I am here in her rooms alone waiting for her we're not strangers. I assure you you can speak with absolute confidence."

"Do you mean that you know the object of my visit?"

"No, I can't say that, or I could give you an answer without waiting for you to say a word. But, of course, I know of your former friendship for her."

"You mean that I was engaged to be married to her?"

"What else should I mean?" answered De Montalt, with a shrug of the shoulders. But he had only made a shot on the strength of an entry or two in an old diary he had seen.

"And you know why it was broken off?" said the other eagerly.

"I have heard, but for the moment I forget. It left you very low down in her esteem, as you can imagine." This was another shot founded on a reference to the baronet which he had discovered.

"Do you mean she is still bitter?"

"What else would she be? You know her," was the answer, spoken with a very expressive and significant laugh.

"You are really her intimate friend, and I can speak openly to you?" asked Landale, after a moment's pause.

"You must please yourself about that. I seek no

man's confidence against his will. You and I are strangers personally; I don't know what your motive may be. You may have a motive that in my opinion is altogether bad. I think I'd rather not hear anything. Of course I know you by name, and anyone might well be anxious to give you a lift in any particular. I know Miss Merrion's affairs pretty intimately, as I told you; but what she would wish me to tell you is another matter."

It was a cleverly worded speech, intended to make the other man eager to speak; and it succeeded.

"Well, to tell you the truth," said the baronet, after a few moments' reflection, as he threw himself into a chair, "there are several questions I'd much rather put to you than to her."

"If I can help you, fire away. Only don't tell me anything you feel the least compunction about, and mind," he added, interrupting the baronet as he was about to speak, "I don't bind myself to answer a single question."

"I want to know whether Miss Merrion has any—love affair?" He coloured slightly under the Count's sharp gaze.

"I can't answer that until I know your motive," said the latter, as if suspiciously.

"My motive's plain enough," returned the baronet, speaking more freely now that the ice was broken. "I want to renew the old engagement."

"Phew!" whistled the other. "The deuce you do. Then why on earth did you ever break it off?"

"Because I was a fool for one thing, and because I thought the taint of old Marlow's crime would stick to his daughter."

"What's that?" exclaimed the Count, jumping to his feet in profound astonishment and staring open-eyed at the speaker. Then recovering himself with a supreme

effort, he let out a tremendous oath, and exclaimed, as if relieving his infinite indignation, "Do you mean you were such a confounded cad as that? I beg your pardon. Of course it's no affair of mine. Excuse my heat. But for the moment I lost self-control." It was a cleverly acted scene to hide from the other man the almost uncontrollable excitement which his words had caused.

"You can answer my questions or not, as you please, sir," exclaimed Sir Edmund Landale, angrily, "but in either case I beg you will spare me the unpleasantness of your personal comment."

"Certainly I will," returned the Count. He had regained self-control now and spoke quite in his usual manner. "I apologise. I am one of the most excitable fools on earth, and I constantly blurt out what a moment's reflection shows me is a fool's verdict. I may say at once, however, that in speaking to Miss Merrion on this subject I have more than once pointed out to her that you had practically no other course open to you."

"I don't need your advocacy any more than your criticism, thank you. I ought not to have spoken at all, probably."

"That is for yourself to consider," returned de Montalt, with quiet firmness; and he added with much apparent candour, "I will answer you very fully now. I am afraid you have no chance of renewing the old engagement, in the ordinary way. Miss Merrion is engaged to be married to a Mr. Tom Cheriton, a barrister, and they are hoping to be married soon. But I do not like him, and if I could do something to hinder the match I would, with all my heart. I don't know whether you—" he paused, leaving the sentence unfinished, save for a look.

A child could have seen that the blow struck hard.

"Are you—?" began Sir Edmund, hesitating.

"I am engaged to marry Miss Merrion's best friend, Mrs. Markham, of Edgcumbe Square, where Miss Merrion is now stopping. If I can help you in any way, I will, and I think I can; but—" he stopped, and looked very grave.

"But what?"

"Is this much to you?"

"I have been looking for Dessie Merrion for over a year simply to get her to marry me."

"Well the way I have in my thoughts is not a pleasant way, and you might shy at it. But I don't think this fellow Cheriton means well by her, and I would do anything to stop the match."

"What is it?" asked Landale.

"Well, it's pretty much on the lines of what you did before, but a bit different, of course. Naturally nothing but a very strong desire to promote her real good would justify a step of the kind. But I'm bound to say that I'm one of those men who look to the end to be achieved. I want to save Miss Merrion from a man whom I know to be unworthy of her, and in such a case I don't stick at the means. But you may be different; and, of course, I wouldn't for the world drag you in against your will."

The baronet was silent, and sat chewing the ends of his moustache, which he thrust between his lips with white taper fingers that trembled.

"You say they mean to be married soon?" he asked, weakly, trifling with the temptation.

"Yes, of course, that's just the deuce of it. If there was plenty of time, one might open her eyes in some other way to the man's real character. But as it is, before one can do anything, she'll be his wife."

The other man winced at this word.

"Of course, you understand I shouldn't let your hand really appear in it at all, at first," continued de Montalt. "I shouldn't think that good tactics. She'd be suspicious possibly, and everything might be spoilt."

The bait was taken, with that addition.

"You haven't told me yet what it is you propose."

"It's simply a judicious use of that past of hers. I can use the knowledge in such a way as to put an end to this; but, of course, to do this one must have all the details pat, and some of them have slipped from my memory, while others I don't know. You would not appear until later, and then I promise you I can so use the facts that she will be glad to welcome you as a friend, knowing all and ready to take her as she really is. She loved you dearly in the past, and her love would live again, if only this Cheriton entanglement were out of the way."

"What do you want me to do, then?" said the baronet, quickly.

"Nothing more than just fill in the gaps, and cross the t's, and dot the i's of the knowledge I already have of that —that Marlow business. Then you can leave me to do the rest, and stand aside till I give you the cue. The girl will thank us all her life long when once her first temper's over."

Then the Count drew his chair closer to the other man, and listened to what he had thus schemed so daringly and cleverly to learn. And as he listened he saw, in his thoughts, the web that he could weave mesh by mesh, round the girl who had tried to thwart him.

CHAPTER IX

"I KNOW YOUR WHOLE STORY"

As soon as the story was finished, and it did not take long in the telling, the Count sent Sir Edmund Landale away with a promise to communicate with him the moment there was anything to tell; and as the latter went down the stairway, his companion looked after him with a leer on his face that was a mixture of triumph for the success that he had gained, and contempt for the man whom he had outwitted in the effort.

Then he returned to the room, and took great pains to replace everything in the position in which he had found it, so far as his memory served him. The safe alone baffled him, as he could not re-lock it.

He had now been so long in the rooms that he was convinced there was no fear of Dessie's returning to disturb him; and he, therefore, drew his chair to the table to make a few rapid notes of the conversation with the baronet. When completed, he compared them with the papers he had taken from the safe, and sat thinking out the best plan of procedure.

He was in high spirits. The luck was with him indeed, and as an old gambler his maxim was to back it for all he was worth. This was just such a position as seemed to justify him piling on every stake he could command.

"I don't see how I can lose," he thought, as he leant back in his chair. "If I know anything of human nature, that girl's as staunch and true as a girl can be; and

she'll go through fire and water rather than betray anyone. Gad, what a blessed thing it is some people are so infernally good that a pledge once given they'll keep it at any sacrifice. But now, there's one thing absolutely critical, and only one thing—she mustn't see Cheriton till my cards are tabled. Then perhaps she won't want to. I wish I knew what she'd wired him this morning. Wonder if I dare wire him. No, by heaven, I have it"—and he dashed his fist violently down on the table—"I'll get away to South Kensington, and find out whether he's coming up, and if he is, I'll slip out and send a bogus telegram to her in a name that'll make her jump out of her skin, and then deal with the man. By Jove, the game's getting worth playing for itself, to say nothing of the stakes—and they're heavy enough to boot."

He smiled more than once as he thought of his latest device, and made ready to go.

"By the way, just as well not to leave too broad a trail behind me here, in the shape of evidence. I'll get back that card I gave the old frump of a housekeeper." For this purpose he went down into the housekeeper's room and engaged her in conversation, saying he should wait no longer, while he glanced about him for the card. As soon as he saw where it was he went and stood near it, and after distracting the woman's attention from his actions, he put it and the baronet's card that lay with it quietly into his pocket. Then, giving the woman a couple of shillings, he left.

"Lucky I found this in my search in her ladyship's room last night," he muttered, as he took out the card, tore it into a hundred pieces and tossed them into the gutter. "It's always well to have an eye for the possible value of little things."

He was in the act of calling a cab when he remem-

bered that he had not lunched; and as he made a rule never to neglect any matter of personal comfort, he turned and set out in search of a restaurant that was good enough to accord with his taste.

He lunched well, and had a glass or two of good wine, tried one of the best cigars which the place could offer him, abused the waiter for not giving him a better, and then, in a thoroughly comfortable frame of mind he went out, hailed a cab and was driven off to Edgcumbe Square.

His main anxiety now was whether Cheriton—"the lover," as he called him somewhat contemptuously in thought—would have come up in response to Dessie's telegram. "If he has, there will be a kettle of fish," he mused, "and my line will not be quite so clear as it might be. I don't think I have left it too late"—a glance at a clock as he passed showed him the time to be nearly three o'clock—"and after all, with the knowledge I have now, I need not be much troubled if she has already told him. The story will take some time in the telling, too. She's a plucky little beggar, no doubt; but she'll need all her nerve to pull her through that business. And after it's over, I don't see what the man's going to do—except hold his tongue and buy me over. Still, I'd rather deal with the girl than the man. Women lose their heads, and make mistakes so much more frequently."

From this his thoughts travelled to the woman he was pledged to marry. "Poor Dora, what a soft-headed, tender-hearted, mass of consummate vanity she is! I wonder how much money she has got. It's worth a lot to marry her and settle down—like grits in a wine glass. Sink everything. Lord, what would life be like, tied to a golden doll like that—if one meant to live it conventionally. She loves me; that's one thing. That's my strong card there; and I believe her love—or at least her vanity,

which makes her think I live but for her silly self—would make her stick to me through thick and thin; ay, through everything, or at least almost everything."

He smiled and showed his white even teeth, and then admired himself in the little looking-glass in the cab, and glancing out, ogled a pretty girl who was passing. Then he harked back in thought to his plans, and in this broken, desultory fashion continued to muse.

He was a man of implacable purpose; but he preferred to seek it by the leaps and bounds which impulse prompted rather than by the steady, deliberate methods of close calculation. He was capable of perpetrating any crime, however desperate and daring, almost on the spur of the moment; and he would carry through any scheme once conceived, however venturesome and hazardous. Thus he would often succeed by sheer dash and bravado, where another man of more set purpose and steady determination might fail.

He was indeed a more dangerous man to deal with than one who laid his plans with consistent forethought. It was impossible to estimate what step he would take. He had an infinite quickness in seeing and seizing an opportunity, an equal capacity in turning it to account, and a reckless readiness in the adoption of his means. But he often wearied of his objects before he had gained them.

The whole of this marriage scheme was the outcome of a merely chance encounter. He had seen George Vezey and his friend in the middle of a row with Belgian sailors, and perceiving that if he rescued them he could probably turn the connection to personal advantage, he had dashed in and saved them without a thought of the danger to himself. When he had done it he began to consider how he could best make them pay the price of the service he had rendered. He followed them to Ostend, saw Mrs.

Markham, read her at a glance, and forthwith resolved to marry her for the sake of her money. He succeeded almost instantly; and all was going well when Dessie Merrion threatened to stop him.

To do that was to rouse all the devil in him. His first instinct was to silence her at any cost. When she had shown herself determined to baulk him, he had thought no more of trying to kill her than of kicking a mad dog that threatened to bite him.

His one feeling in regard to that attempt was infinite anger that he had failed. The drug he had chosen was one that would have been exceedingly difficult to trace, and he cursed his folly for having bungled.

Meanwhile, his suspicions that the girl herself had certain things to hide in her past had been aroused, in consequence of something that had fallen from her in their first conversation; and when it was necessary to go to her room to search for the poisoned tea, he had used the opportunity to rummage her boxes for any paper or reference that would give him the clue. He had found a clue to the fact that she was the girl who got hold of the jewels that day when he had been arrested at Birmingham, and this had determined him to find out more.

This he had done in much greater detail than he had anticipated, thanks to the shrewd stroke of overhauling Dessie's rooms, and the information which had been given him by Sir Edmund Landale. He quite appreciated that man's petty and malignant scoundrelism, even while he himself resolved to make use alike of the man and his knowledge. What he had learnt had been much increased by the way it had fitted in with many other facts already in his possession; and he now felt that he was almost certain to win.

When the cab stopped at Mrs. Markham's house he

jumped out, tossed the man a liberal fare—he was always generous with cabmen and all who ministered to his comfort—and ran confidently up the steps of the splendid house.

The servant, quick to recognise the rising sun and bow down to it, was very deferential, and told him that Mrs. Markham was not at home, but had left a message asking him to wait should he call in her absence.

He went in, as though he were already master of the house, and strolled into the library to smoke.

"Is Miss Merrion in?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "She waited in because she is expecting a visitor, sir—Mr. Cheriton."

"Good! I'm first," he thought, and then added: "Tell her, with my compliments—stay, where is she?"

"In the small drawing-room, sir."

"Ah! I'll go to her myself. No, don't bother to announce me. I know the way well enough." And humming a gay Venetian barcarolle, he went up the magnificent staircase, and with a smile on his lips opened the door.

Dessie was sitting waiting for Tom Cheriton, and when the door opened she looked up with a glow of expectation in her face; but the light died out sharply in her disappointment at seeing that instead of the man she loved it was the man of all others she hated and feared.

She got up at once to leave the room, resolved not to remain alone with him.

"I wish to speak to you," he said, barring her path.

"I will not stay in the room with you. I don't feel safe alone." He understood the reference and laughed.

"And your instincts are about as true as they can be, too. You are not safe in a room alone with me. But

you will run more danger just now in leaving the room than in stopping here."

"Nevertheless, I insist on your allowing me to pass. This is monstrous. Would you have me ring for the assistance of the servants?"

He looked at her during a long pause of silence, while she faced him, her anger bringing quick flushes to her cheeks.

"You are right. It would be monstrous to ring for the servants. It would be scandalous, grossly scandalous, for you"—he flashed a threat at her—"for you, Miss—Marlow, now, do you wish to go?"

He stood aside, opened the door, bowed low with one of his gestures of exaggerated politeness, and laid his hand to his heart.

But the mere mention of the name had conquered the girl, who all white and trembling had sunk down on the nearest chair.

"You are very foolish to drive me to give you these sharp thrusts, young lady," he said, closing the door and going near her. "Very foolish. But your self-will has to be broken in. Now you will understand that things are very different from what they were when we met this morning, and when you are sufficiently recovered to be able to hear me out I will tell you what you had better know before your expected visitor arrives—I mean Mr. Cheriton."

The mention of her lover's name was to the girl like the turn of a bayonet in a wound, and a low cry of pain escaped her.

The sight was painful even to the man who had caused the trouble. He hated the sight of sorrow, and especially was the distress of women unpleasant. It did not soften

him in the slightest. Had the girl been actually dying he would still have carried out his plan. It was necessary to his project to remove this particular obstacle from his course, and remove it he would in any way that offered itself. He would have preferred a way that made others' trouble and sorrow as slight as possible—or that would at any rate have kept him out of personal contact with the evidences of the trouble. But if no other way was open save this, then he must endure the discomfort of witnessing the distress of the girl who ventured to oppose him.

He prided himself a little upon this selfish sensibility, regarding it rather as softness of heart; and he took it for a point in his own favour that so far from gloating over Dessie's humiliation he was sorry for her.

"I am very sorry to have to cause you this pain," he said, in a voice that was very sympathetic, "and, believe me, I would not have done it if you had not forced me. Even now I am quite ready to proclaim a truce. I would so much rather be your friend than——"

The hypocrisy of this profession stung the girl into protest. She looked up, her face grey and her lips trembling, and tried to keep her voice steady as she said:

"Say what you have come to say, but spare me these falsehoods about your personal feelings. You have so far beaten me that I shall listen quietly to you."

"I know your whole story," he answered "and I will tell you plainly what use I mean to make of it."

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

"I AM bound to say, Miss Merrion"—the Count paused as he mentioned the name, and then interpolated —"I will use that name, of course, until you compel me to use any other—I am bound to admit, I repeat, that the luck has been against you heavily in this matter—very heavily. In fact, I've had it all. I don't know what your philosophy of life is—I should like to know it indeed, because your life, like mine, has been a varied one —but my philosophy is, that it's not a bit of good to fight against one's luck. I used to do it," he said, airily, "and to kick against the pricks; tried to take the bit in my teeth, and used to swear that I'd go my own way, but—"

"Will you please say what concerns me, not what concerns you?" interrupted Dessie, curtly.

"I am not speaking without a purpose, believe me," he retorted. "I never do in a thing of this sort; and I'm not wasting time. You've had rather a knockdown blow; there are some more to come; and it's no use my beginning to talk seriously till you've quite recovered the full use of your faculties. You've got an ugly corner to turn and a heavy decision to make—and I don't want to tell you the facts till you're quite yourself. Some people may like to take advantage of a girl at the moment when her senses are half numbed by the effects of the first blow. But I don't want that. I want you to think while I'm

talking and be ready, when I've done, to make a final answer."

"I am perfectly ready to listen, and perfectly capable of understanding all you may say," returned Dessie. "But I wish you to be as quick as possible."

"I don't know that there is much for me to say after all," said de Montalt, speaking slowly and meditatively. "You will understand, of course, that there are certain parts of the narrative in which I have not yet all the details. For instance, I do not know all the contents of your safe at the Safe Deposit Company—but I know you have one there, and that it is in the name—shall I mention it again?"—he stopped abruptly, dropped his voice, having noted her start at the mention of the safe, and glanced about him, as if to suggest that it might be prudent to mention no more details than were necessary, even though they were alone.

Her answer gave him the first clue to the line which she was likely to take.

"You may mention anything and everything," she said. "It is quite obvious that whatever has to be told about me must be told in full. Say what you like."

"I don't agree with you," he answered, sharply; but her reply shook a little of his confidence. "You have much to learn yet. Well, then, the name in which you rent the safe is Marlow—Dorothy Marlow; by a coincidence, the name from which you were flying that March afternoon five years ago, when passing through Birmingham Station you stole some valuable jewels, very valuable jewels—no others than the Rubies of Rohilkund."

Dessie moved, as if going to protest, but said nothing.

"The father of Dorothy Marlow was one Anthony Marlow, at one time a man in a good position and reputed

wealthy. He was a bank manager until one day two persons called for him, and he stepped straight from the bank parlour into the police cell, passing on to a convict prison to work out his heavy sentence for forgery. He didn't die in prison, as his friends might well have wished him to; but came out to be a curse to his family—a drunkard, a swindler, and a thief of the lowest kind. His wife, like a fool, clung to him, and never till his death ceased to believe in the possibility of his repentance. But why go on?—you know the tale, and it only blisters the tongue to tell it now. He made the whole of his family utterly miserable, abandoned, and wretched."

Dessie had listened with her eyes closed and her fingers clasped rigidly, and when he paused a moment, the room seemed first to grow dark, and then to swim; noises sounded in her ears, and she feared she was going to faint.

He noticed the change in her.

"I would rather say no more," he said.

"Go on," she replied, after a minute's struggle for self-mastery, the words slipping out between lips all dry and compressed in her pain.

"As you will. His son, who had been placed in a good position by friends, was led away by the man and shot in a burgling affray. His daughters—there were two——" with a smothered sob the girl put up her hands and covered her face, pressing it with all her strength—"his daughters took different paths. One stuck by the home and the mother, but the elder—— No, —— it," he cried, breaking off excitedly. "I'm not going on with this any further. Enough that I know the whole story. You can see that." With that he got up and went to one of the windows and stood there to give the girl time to recover herself.

Dessie sat mazed with the pain and sorrow that the scene caused. Everything that she had striven so jealously to hide, every horrible outline of the grim skeleton that she had thought locked safe away in the secrecy of her own heart, was known; and known to this man of all others, who was resolved and eager to use it all solely as his own interests prompted.

The smart of having the old wounds torn open with this cruel hand was mingled now with the recognition of her own helplessness and overthrow, and the two together seemed to turn every vein in her body into a throbbing course of racking torture, leaving no sense active save that of suffering.

After a long interval of silence she said:

"I am ready to listen again. I accept that you know much. What do you intend to do with your knowledge?"

"I am sick of this scene," he said. "I will make a bargain with you—secrecy for secrecy. You harbour a number of altogether unfounded suspicions against me; I know the truth about you. I will hold my tongue if you agree to put aside as impossible your suspicions, and, of course, make reparation."

"Reparation? What do you mean?"

"The jewels that were stolen in Birmingham were stolen from me in the first instance. They must be restored, of course."

"How did you get them?" asked Dessie, with an instinct of suspicion.

"You had better not ask," was the reply. "The story will not make pleasant hearing for anyone—for you especially."

Dessie looked at him quickly. She feared him more than ever. The knowledge of her history which he had

already shown that he possessed made her view the insinuation in his words with a fresh and sickening dread. To her he had become a man whose threats were never empty ones, and whose acts were only sure to be more deadly than his words.

She sat and thought as connectedly as her intense agitation would permit; but she could only see her way to one course.

"I can do nothing by myself now," she said, after a long pause. "I told you this morning that Mr. Cheriton would be here to-day and that I should tell him everything. That determination is strengthened by what you have said. I thought he would have been here now——"

As she was speaking a knock at the door interrupted her, and a servant came in with a telegram.

"A telegram for you, Miss," said the man. Dessie took it, and with fingers still trembling tore it open, the man waiting to see if any reply was to be sent.

"There is no answer," she said; and the Count de Montalt, who was watching and listening with every nerve at full tension, detected in the voice and manner a tone of disappointment.

While the servant went out and closed the door behind him Dessie made a big fight for self-control, but couldn't get it. The whole world seemed to have deserted her, and though she would have given all she was worth to have hidden her emotion from the man who was watching her and waiting for her to speak, she could not repress the evidence of her trouble that made her lips tremble and her voice falter.

"Mr. Cheriton is—is detained, and cannot come to me till—till to-morrow. I can, therefore, do nothing—till then. And now excuse me. I am upset."

She was hurrying out of the room when the door was opened, this time quickly, and Mrs. Markham came hurrying in.

"Oh, Godefroi, I am so sorry to be so late," she began, but seeing Dessie's white face and agitated look she stopped and cried, "Whatever's the matter? Dessie, what is it? Have you two been quarrelling?"

"Not in the least," said the Count, quietly. "We have simply been keeping each other company till you came home. And now," he smiled, as if most indulgently, "I am sorry to say that Miss Merrion has had a little disappointment of a kind which you and I can sympathise with, Dora. Mr. Cheriton was to have been here this afternoon." He smiled again, and looked into Mrs. Markham's face lovingly as he carried her hand to his lips, and then turning, opened the door for Dessie to go away. "Better news to-morrow, Miss Merrion," he said, as she went out; and the expression of his voice, the emphasis on the name, and the phrase he chose, were all understood by the miserable girl as she ran upstairs, her grief half choking her.

Mrs. Markham stared after her in astonishment, and then turned to her lover to put her feelings into words.

"Are you sure you haven't been saying anything to upset her, Godefroi?" she asked. "I've never known her take such a fit into her head before. She's generally so cool and self-reserved about Mr. Cheriton. I've often wondered, indeed, whether she really loves him very deeply."

"Do you mean that if we were apart, and you expected me to come to you—as I would at your lightest nod—and I was to telegraph, 'I cannot come,' that you would just toss that pretty head and pout these ruby

lips "—kissing them—" and say, 'Let him come, or let him stay away, it is all one to me?' Is that what you would do?"

She was clinging to him, looking up into his face, and she sighed and then smiled, coaxingly, as she asked:—

"And if I were to? And if you got to know it—would it make you very, very unhappy, Godefroi?"

He smiled down into her eyes before he answered, and taking her face in his hands, held it upturned to him.

"If I thought you could ever grow indifferent to me, not caring whether I were with you or away, Dora," he answered, slowly, and as if with deep feeling, "I should not care to live. I cannot bear to think of it, my dear." And he stooped and kissed her again, passionately. Then he held her at arm's length, still looking lovingly into her face. "And to think, sweetheart, that we have been so long in the world and have been able to live without the exquisite delight of this mutual love of ours. Ah! what a life we will have together in the future. What revenge we will take upon the past! How happy we will be. I wish we were married, Dora. I hate this study of the conventions—this waiting."

His tender tone and passionate kisses thrilled her.

"It shall be when you will," she answered, submissively.

"Do you know why I wish it? Come, and sit down; I'll tell you. Of course, it's only a stupid lover's fears, but the feeling has been haunting me all day, and I said to myself, 'I will tell my sweetheart.' Do you know, Dora, I have the thought that love is never love until each can tell the other the littlenesses and weaknesses that make up half of one's life. This is a weakness."

"I can never think of weakness in connection with you,

Godefroi. You always seem to me so strong, so self-reliant, so resolute—but I shall love to hear of a weakness," and she laughed in sheer childish happiness.

"It was only a dream of mine. Something last night must have made me very thoughtful. I walked to my hotel, and went straight to my room and to bed and I dreamt! as vividly as only one with my imagination can dream. First, the sun was shining in a land that seemed all gold, and you and I were walking hand in hand on the shore of a sea, silver calm; and the air seemed soft with the sweetness of peace and love. Then came a change. It was still day, but the sun was setting, and we were on a road hard and stony, leading over a barren plain to the gates of a city that frowned on us from ahead. And we toiled over the rough way, each full of love for the other, each helping, cheering, hoping—till as we came close to the gates of the city, the red sun sank suddenly, the air turned dark, and when we passed the gates, they closed with a heavy clang behind us, and the night felt chill and clinging. Then turning I saw on the gate the words in letters of dull, menacing lead—'Who enter, part;' and I seemed to grasp in a moment the meaning of all—we were to part."

He paused and drew her closer to him as he continued:—

"I took you in my arms then, and hid your face on my breast, that you might not see what was written, and turning, I went back to the gate and struck it, and strove with all my force to open it. But all that came of my efforts was a waste of strength and a mocking laugh. I turned again, and holding you that you might not hear the sound, I fled with you along the road into the middle of the city. Then suddenly there was a gaping, gibing, jeering crowd at our heels and on all sides of us; out-

running me because I carried you. And they turned to point and laugh, and utter sneers at us because we loved each other and were to part. And then—ah, Dora, I can feel them now—long, bony fingers, and strong skeleton arms seized and held me, and though I struggled till I thought my heart would burst in my frenzy, they tore you away, and I saw you borne away till you were lost in the distance, and a sense of the awfulness of solitude, of a life to be passed without the warmth of your touch, your smile, your kisses, your love, came upon me and overwhelmed me with misery. I knew then, my darling, what it would be to me to lose you; and when I woke it was with the terrible dread on me that the dream was one of those strange warnings that we mortals have, omens of coming calamity. But it shall not be, shall it? Tell me, sweetheart, nothing shall ever part us."

"Nothing, Godefroi; nothing on earth if I can help it. If you wish it I will marry you to-morrow." She clung to him and kissed him, and made him kiss her over and over again, as if some protection against the fear of parting lay in the multitude of kisses.

And in this way it came to be tacitly understood between them that the marriage should take place very soon; and when the servants brought in some tea to them, Dora Markham was all laughter and merriment in an excess of pleasure at the anticipation, with no thought straying from her own ecstasy to the wretched girl upstairs who, in the attempt to save her friend from the shipwreck of this marriage had already risked her own life, and now saw her every hope of happiness in jeopardy.

CHAPTER XI

THE STORY OF RED DELILAH

Dessie Merrion rose the next morning ill alike in mind and body.

The evening before had been inexpressibly trying to her. At dinner she had forced herself to play a part and hide her condition from her friend's eyes; and she succeeded only because the little love scene with the Count had left Mrs. Markham with no room in her thoughts for anything save the hope that he would urge her on to a speedy marriage. After dinner they had all gone to the theatre, and while the two were love-making, Dessie had simulated an interest in the play, while in reality she had been engrossed by the tragedy of her own troubles.

As soon as they reached home the girl had pleaded a headache and gone off to bed to lie awake, weighed down with sorrow and hopeless misery, till the dim light of the dawn seemed to bring relief by inspiring a suggestion of something she could do.

Throughout all there were two great fears. One was that Tom Cheriton would fail to see her past in the light in which she had always thought he would. The other concerned the sister, to whom de Montalt had referred with such grim significance.

Over and over again her question and his reply kept recurring to her. "How did you get them?" "You had better not ask. The story will not make pleasant

fearing for anyone—for you especially." What did he mean? She had not dared to ask him. But a means of finding out the truth by herself occurred to her—and it was the thought that in this way she would have something to fill up her time until her lover came, which gave her some relief.

The two or three hours' sleep that she had in the early morning after coming to this decision calmed her a good deal and steadied her nerves, and when she went downstairs it was with a full perception of the necessity for facing the crisis resolutely, and not permitting herself to give way to such outward weakness as that in which her interview with the Count had ended on the day before. A letter from Tom Cheriton cheered her. It was full of concern for her and regret that his uncle's illness had made it impossible to get away, while he promised that the next day should see him by her side in town. He promised this, and told her to depend upon him. This was the part of the letter which cheered her.

Her intention was to go to Scotland Yard in her character as a journalist, and as if in search of matter for an article, to make inquiries about those Rohilkund jewels. She was not unknown at the Yard, as she had been there more than once for similar purposes in her hunt for good "copy." She asked for Inspector Malcolm, whom she knew personally, and he received her very kindly and courteously. She was a favourite of his; and as he had first known her as a girl with no friends, fighting a plucky fight for a living, he had always been glad to help her, if a chance came in his way.

"You don't look very well, Miss Merrion," he said, looking at her with kind compassionate eyes. "I'm afraid you're overworking. Got some new story ready for us? We always buy your books, and it would do you

good to see the pleasure which they cause when I take one home."

"I think one will be published next month, Mr. Malcolm. But it's not the writing of that which has made me run down. I finished it long since; and the pleasure of writing it was like a holiday. I shall send you a copy with my name in it if you'll let me. But now, I've come on business this morning. You may have seen some mystery stories—jewel stories—of mine, running in one or two places. No? Well, they're not the same class of thing as the books which you like. They're pot boilers, you see. People like that sort of thing; so I have to turn them out. One must boil to live, you know. Most of them are founded on fact; and to tell you the truth I'm in search of facts now. Things that actually happen are so much more extraordinary than things one imagines. In fact, it's only the impossible that's commonplace nowadays. What I want now is a good, rich, fruity fact with plenty of crime in it, and to be served with more than a soupçon of murder and mystery."

"Well, we've plenty of it binned here," said the Inspector, "but I don't know that I'm glad to hear you're taking to writing about that side of human nature, Miss Merrion. We like your books for the absence of it."

"Then don't you read these tales. But I'll tell you the case which has been suggested to me as likely to serve my present purpose"—she took a piece of paper from her pocket and read from it—"the case of the Rubies of Rohilkund; a murder, or mystery, or intrigue, five or ten years ago. There, can you help me to get the facts of it?"

Inspector Malcolm looked at her so shrewdly and gravely for a moment that the thought crossed her mind that he suspected she had some other motive. She was

very nervous, but his hesitation sprang from no other cause than momentary reluctance to tell the story to her.

"It's not a nice story, Miss Merrion, and I wish you had asked for any other. I know the facts well enough—indeed, no one better, for I was personally engaged in it. If you can do without precise details—I mean exact spelling of names, days of the month and week, and so on—I can give you the facts myself without bothering to look them up. Enough for your purpose I expect."

"Sure to be," assented Dessie. "If not, I'll ask you."

"It must be seven years I think—either six or seven at any rate—that the case came under our notice; and giving you the facts, not in the order in which we found them out, but somewhat as they occurred they were about these. You can make your notes and pop in any question you want to ask. The jewels got called the Rubies of Rohilkund, because of a newspaper paragraph; but as a matter of fact there were only three stones in this part of the business. Three very large, very fine stones and immensely valuable; and they were in a gold setting—a star which had formed part of a most lovely Indian State ornament—the Regal Crescent."

"Any picture of it—a block looks so well, you know," said Dessie.

"I dare say I could hunt you up one. It was a curious star with only three points—one of these huge rubies at each, the fourth point joining it to the centre of the crescent. This sort of thing—" and he drew a rough outline of the design. "Well, the Crescent was part of the State jewels of Rohilkund, and they got over to this country under very curious circumstances. The then Maharajah—he's dead now—was about as bad a man as any State could be cursed with, and when he had spent every rupee he could drag from his wretched people, he

hit on the dodge of selling the State jewels—they are worth a fabulous sum, and famed all the world over—and getting paste imitations made to put in their places. Accordingly he sent over to Europe a man named Maiwand, whom he trusted implicitly, though the man was as big a drunkard and scoundrel as the master; and he gave into his charge half of all this most priceless collection."

"What do you say was his name?" asked Dessie, looking up from the shorthand note she was taking.

"Maiwand. Well, you can guess what happened—at least you could if you knew much of London life. The man settled first in Paris and then came on to London. He made a few attempts to ascertain what it would cost to get the pastes he wanted, and also one or two inquiries as to the best way of selling the jewels. But he never intended to get the pastes, and meant merely to sell the jewels under the Maharajah's authority, which he held, and stick to the proceeds. You know, of course, this is a murder story?"

"Was it this man who was murdered then?" asked Dessie, trying to keep her voice steady.

"It was, and by a woman, too. Soon after he settled here he got into tow with a woman who was then in the height of her notoriety, and was known as 'Red Delilah,' from the colour of her wonderful hair. She was a most extraordinary woman to look at—a sort of cross between one's notions of an enchantress, a devil, and an angel. But she was a wonderfully clever woman; and the men that came her way never got free without paying dearly—and I should think more men were in love with her in the short time she was famous than with any other."

"Your office is very close, Mr. Malcolm. Do you think you could give me a glass of water? I think I walked too fast in coming here."

Dessie spoke with great effort, and the inspector saw that her face was bloodless enough to suggest fainting. He got her some water instantly, opened the window, and was all solicitude and sympathy.

"I could see when you came in you weren't strong, Miss Merrion. Can't you run down into the country for a few days? A healthy sea air would do the world for you."

"It's all right, I'm better now," she answered, after a minute. "I had a fever you know, some little time since, and perhaps I haven't quite picked up all my strength again. Go on with the facts, will you? I suppose I've got most of the material ones now, though. Let me see, what did you say was the name of the woman? Red—Red——"

"Red Delilah," said the inspector, answering her, but looking at her as though he much doubted the wisdom of keeping her writing any longer. "I'll hurry over the rest," he said, in part satisfaction of this thought. "We never quite knew who she was and where she came from; and to this hour no one knows what became of her. It was said at one time that she was a Belgian from Antwerp, with a very bad past; another version was that she was the daughter of old Marlow, the forger of Stafford —Don't you feel any better, Miss Merrion? You're still awfully white and shaky? Shall I stop? No? Well, a third yarn was that she was a Whitechapel girl named Ditcher; a fourth—but there were twenty yarns. Anyway she got this man Maiwand into her clutches, and a heap of the money he spent went to her. But not content with this, she formed the colossal scheme of robbing him of every stone he had with him; and for this purpose, there is no doubt in my mind, though whether the evidence was clear enough to convict I'll not say, she got the

help of a man—half English, half French, and the rest diabolical—named Colimbert."

"I should like to have that name spelt right," said Dessie, interrupting for an instant.

"Colimbert—Adolphe Colimbert," he replied, spelling it. "I never saw that man, but from all accounts he must have been a fitting help-meet for such a woman as Red Delilah. I remember a clever description which spoke of him as having the pluck of a d'Artagnan, the beauty of a Byron, the manners of a Bayard, and the morals of an Alsatian bully. Some of you press writers can put things smartly, I know. What part he was to take in the robbery is not clear; but one night the unfortunate Indian was found by his servant stabbed through the heart. It is supposed that whoever committed the murder—and there is no doubt the woman was in it—had been disturbed. The whole place was in confusion, as if an exhaustive search had been made, and a number of the jewels were put together in readiness for being carried off. The search for the remainder had cost the murderers all, or nearly all, as they had had to fly. The only really valuable thing gone was this Star of the Crescent; and one theory about it was that it had been broken off the Crescent before by the Indian himself, in some drunken freak, and given to the woman. But it was never found; and from that minute to this neither Red Delilah nor Colimbert has been seen. That's the mystery in a nutshell. Is it any good to you?"

"Yes, indeed. It's even more thrilling than I had expected," said Dessie, forcing a smile on her pale face. "It has interested even me. But what became of the rest of the jewels?"

"Oh, the Government interfered when the truth leaked out. They were packed up and sent back to Rohilkund,

and the people were so indignant there that the Prince died shortly afterwards. Popular indignation is fatal sometimes out there. The three rubies were not sent back, of course. They were never found. A big reward was offered—I think £2,000—and afterwards this was increased by the new Prince's people privately, and a promise given that no questions would be asked. I rather fancy, too, that some negotiations were opened once or twice with some individuals, but I expect they were bogus. Those who got hold of the rubies knew how to keep them, or get rid of them safely, however, and it's little will ever be heard of them any more."

Dessie rose, thanked her friend, renewed her promise to send a copy of her new book as soon as it came out, and left. She crossed Parliament Street, went through the Horse Guards, and into St. James's Park. There, as soon as she found a retired seat, she sat down to think.

The story she had heard would probably change the whole course of her life.

"Red Delilah" was the sister to whom the Count de Montalt had referred, and the girl's new and latest fear was that the story which he had told her yesterday was gathered in part at first hand; that he knew from personal contact with her sister—whose proper name was Daphne—some of the facts which he had included in the tale which he had told her.

Who was he?

Dessie had understood that there had been a secret lover in the background behind all the mad excesses of voluptuous sensuality into which her sister had plunged; but she had never known his name, nor heard a word describing him. Was this man, de Montalt, that lover? —that Adolphe Colimbert, whose name she had had spelt out to her?

If so, what would happen?

Dessie herself had up to that moment had no knowledge whatever of the circumstances under which this wretched Indian had come by his death. But what she did know filled her now with the gravest and ugliest suspicions. She remembered well enough how Daphne had come suddenly to the little sea village where she and her mother—who was then dying—had hidden themselves after her father's death, and while her sister was still plunged in the sea of London vice. She had told Dessie that there had been great trouble; that she had abandoned the old life some months before; that she had been converted and had become a nurse. It was in a nurse's uniform that she had come, with most of her wonderful hair—a golden aureole of magnificent hair—cut short and the remainder dyed black. She had explained it by saying that she had cut it off as part of her self-imposed penance; and that she had regarded the loss of it as one of the outward signs that she and her past life were parted for all time.

But now, as the girl's thoughts travelled back and she looked at the facts by the light of her present knowledge, and her greater experience of the world, everything wore a different aspect. It was only too probable that the nurse's uniform and the dyed hair were a part of a disguise, that the story of the conversion was a fable, and that the fear that this terrible crime might be discovered had frightened her sister to lay aside the old life and adopt a quiet and safe one.

It was true she had never returned to it, and for years had lived a life which so far as Dessie herself knew and believed, had been good and right. But all this discovery had so distressed and indeed so dazed her, that the girl felt her faith in everything and everybody was shaken.

A sense of unreality tinged every thought and feeling; and as she sat in blank despair gazing out at the sunlighted scene all round her, it seemed as though she had been living an artificial life and had only just been roused to know how painful and distressing was the reality.

But there were practical steps to be taken; pressing difficulties and dangers to be faced; and she set herself to try and think them out.

The one awful and commanding terror was not for herself, but for her sister.

When her mother died she had extracted a promise that Dessie would do all that she could at any time to help the sister whom both believed to be repentant. Daphne was the elder of the two by some years; but Dessie had been her mother's prop, and it was with the younger girl that the mother had always associated the idea of strength. She had often thought the elder might need the younger's help. It was for the dead mother's sake, therefore, as much as from the promptings of her own heart, that Dessie had kept in touch with her sister, through the address of the Safe Company. All this was vivid in her memory now, as she sat appalled by the thought of her sister's danger.

One thing was clear. She could see it as plainly as one looking across a calm sea toward the sun can see the path of reflection.

Daphne must be saved whatever the price.

What would that price be? As she asked herself the question, she shuddered as she thought of the man who was to fix it: "Secrecy for secrecy," he had said. Was it possible to pass through life dependent on that terrible man's silence?—watching the nod of his head and the beck of his finger, and only speaking and moving in accordance with his permission? She was to sacrifice her

friend, the woman who had risked life itself for her sake; to see her wedded to a man whom she knew to be a murderer and believed to be infinitely worse than many a murderer.

It could not be. There must be some way of escape from that degrading slavery; and she must find it. She jumped to her feet as if the mere act of resolution had given her energy; and at the same instant a suggestion occurred to her, and she was surprised and irritated that she had not thought of it before.

She must go and see her sister and find out the truth for herself at first hand. Before she even saw her lover, and before she had to exchange another word with the man who thus threatened her, she would see Daphne.

No sooner had the idea suggested itself than she set to work to carry it out, and started to walk to Victoria Station, maturing her plan as she went.

CHAPTER XII

TOM CHERITON'S SUSPICIONS

DAPHNE MARLOW, or Nurse Morland, as she called herself, was in the infirmary of an industrial town in the north-east of Yorkshire—a six or seven hours' ride from London. Dessie would have to remain away at least one night, therefore, and certainly to give some explanation of her absence to Mrs. Markham.

Moreover, Tom Cheriton was coming up that day, and something must be said to him as well. That she should tell the facts to either of them was out of the question; and the difficulty was what to say. She resolved, of course, to wire short messages to both; and to send a letter in addition to Tom. She went to Victoria Station, because that might help to keep them all off her trail; as her journey had to be made by the Great Northern line from King's Cross.

To Mrs. Markham she wired that a business commission had been given her suddenly, and she could not be back that night, and possibly not the next. To Cheriton she sent two wires. The first to his uncle's house in Staffordshire, asking him not to come to town that day if he had not already started. The second to Mrs. Markham's house, saying an urgent matter had arisen and she would write to his chambers.

The letter was a scrawl of only a few lines.

"Dearest, I am in a little trouble that I cannot write about. I have to leave town on account of it, and am so sorry to have brought you up to town to-day. This is

very mysterious, I know; but very important all the same. All day yesterday I longed for you; and now that you are really coming I am not stopping to see you. Don't be angry. You will not when I tell you and explain. A thousand kisses from your most eccentric, D. D.

"P. S.—Trust me. I am full of wild desire to see you."

It was an incoherent letter; but she had not time to attempt to re-write it; so she dropped it into the letter box, breathing a fervent prayer that after all, the parting was only for a day or so, and that she might yet be able to explain everything. Then she travelled by the District Railway to King's Cross, and was soon speeding northward in the express, turning over and over in her mind all the events which in a few days had made up this wild whirl of change in her life; and speculating what would be the outcome of this interview with her sister, whom she had not seen for six years, and whose safety she was now perhaps going to purchase at the cost of both happiness and honour.

But looming largest in her mind was the thought of her lover; of what he would think of her extraordinary absence; of his love for her and hers for him; of the bar that was thus being built up between them; and of the great glooming fear that she was to lose him. It was a sad journey in every respect.

To all in Edgcumbe Square it was indeed quite unaccountable.

"Bolted!" was the Count's thought; and he was at first immensely pleased at it, and found many reasons to account for her taking the step. But when he had considered the news more earnestly, and had smoked a cigar over it, his shrewdness put him much nearer to the truth.

"She's been finding out more about the jewels," he

said to himself, "and has perhaps found out something of the ugly association between them and that red devil of a sister of hers. I wish I knew what she had discovered, and could see the best use to make of it. I shouldn't be surprised if she's gone off to her sister to find out from her what right I have to the jewels, and whether she ought to give them up to me. You never know what these conscientious people will do. That's the worst of them. If it was anybody without a conscience I should know well enough that her first instinct would be to get the sister to clear off out of the way. But she won't do that yet, because I haven't shown her that card, and that if she doesn't hold her tongue I'll just hand the sister over to the police. She may have guessed it, of course, if she's learnt all the facts; but—stay a moment, I have it."

He thought intently for a minute and then decided. Sending a message to Mrs. Markham that he had forgotten an important matter and would return in an hour's time, he left the house, jumped into a cab, and told the man to drive him to Sir Edmund Landale's.

"I have news for you," he said to the baronet; "most important and urgent. Things are quickening to a crisis. Miss Merrion and I have had a desperate quarrel—about you. I was endeavouring to further your wishes, and the result is that she has changed round—you know the fickleness of a woman—and vows there is no villainy I would not commit, and only a few I have not committed." He laughed pleasantly. "That comes of her associating me with you, I suppose. Anyway, that I am wishing to marry Mrs. Markham for her money, and am an unscrupulous fortune-hunter, was the smallest charge she had against me, and about the pleasantest compliment she could pay me. Heigho! girls are hard to deal with."

"When was this?" asked the baronet.

"Only yesterday, after I saw you; and I have come, therefore, to tell you in all candour and fairness that, directly and personally, I can not only be no help to you, but that if you want to avoid provoking her distrust completely, while she remains in her present cantankerous temper, you had better not let her dream that you and I have even seen each other."

"But you say the quarrel was because you were trying to help my interests?"

"What else should I say, if I am to speak the truth?" he answered, sharply, irritated at having been caught in so glaring an inconsistency. "I was urging her to have no more to do with this Cheriton. But what is it to me whom she marries? Do you think if I had not had your cause in my thoughts I should have bothered to interfere? Not I. But I have brought on myself a deadly quarrel with the one woman for whom my future wife really cares. I wish I had never heard a word of your story or seen you; and she had married this stolid barrister of hers." He assumed the appearance of so much anger and implied so strongly that the fault lay with the baronet that the latter was a little nervous.

"I am sorry," he began, when the Count interrupted.

"Sorry! What the —— is the good of your sorrow? It won't mend my quarrel with my future wife's dearest friend, will it? Or stop all the infernal unpleasantness and trouble and tears, and all the rest of it? If it would I'd be sorry with you. Sorry, indeed!" with an emphasis of contempt on the word.

He took out a cigarette and lighted it with a suggestion of viciousness in the action—as though venting his anger upon it. The baronet was a nervous man with

other men, and watched him rather abashed by his blustrous energy and temper.

"Excuse my manner," said the Count at length. He had been keenly watching the effect of his words on the other, and wished to master him. "I am the devil himself when I'm roused—and this thing has shaken me up deucedly. But don't think I mean going back on my word to you yesterday. If I could have seen what would happen I wouldn't have promised my help, I admit. But once given, I keep my word, come what may. This girl has chosen to quarrel with me. So be it. She must take the consequences. She'll repent, not I. And it's because I mean her to that I'm here now. She's bolted from London——"

"Bolted!" exclaimed the other, as much astonished as de Montalt intended him to be. "What do you mean? Where?"

"Bolted," repeated the other. "Mind, I don't mean bolted to her lover; but actually bolted from him. Listen," he said, and then thinking he had reduced Landale to a condition of confusion, he told him his plan. "You know that ugly tale about her past; and you know there was a sister with a very shaky history. Well, things seem to be worse in that quarter than she thought—I let out some truths indeed which I had much better have kept to myself—and my opinion is she's bolted down to the sister to find out all the truth for herself. Now, mark this: You want to have a hold on her. The secret of that sister's past will give you what you want. I'll tell it some day, but not now—and if you want to gain the end you have in view you can do it."

He stopped and glanced keenly at his companion, whose face wore a puzzled, undecided, hesitating expression.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked at length.

"I don't want you to do anything," was the answer, with vicious emphasis on the word. "Do you want to marry Miss Merrion—or to have her in your power? Or would you rather see her in another man's arms? That's the question."

"You know the answer to it," replied Landale with the quickness of jealousy.

"Then I'll tell you how to do it. Go down to Middlesbridge by the first train that starts from King's Cross; find out where Nurse Morland, of the Middle Riding Infirmary, lives, and watch her every movement. Nurse Morland is Daphne Marlow, and her sister has gone down, either to get her out of the way, or to induce her to take some step which may help to shake off the power which anyone can exercise over Dorothy Marlow, who knows where a hand can be laid on Daphne's shoulder. Be down there by accident. Know nothing whatever. If you meet Miss Merrion, don't let her have a thought that it is not accidental. But don't let the other escape—and mind, she's artful enough to be the devil's wife. Lastly, don't let a syllable escape you to suggest that you have ever heard of me."

The baronet put a number of questions, which the other man either answered or fenced with as he thought best, giving any reply that suited his purpose, without the least regard to its truth; and in the end Sir Edmund, though profoundly disliking the task, consented to go.

"Why not have her watched in the ordinary way? There are thousands of men who do this sort of thing cheap enough—and much better than I possibly can," he protested half a dozen times.

"For the simple reason that it isn't safe to let a single soul but you and me have a suspicion that she is not what

she says—Nurse Morland. This is necessary for her sister's sake. The least suspicion in an outsider's knowledge, and our hold would be gone for good."

This consideration prevailed in the end; and all was settled when the Count drove back to Edgcumbe Square, chuckling to himself at the adroit use he had made of the baronet.

He found Mrs. Markham very curious as to the errand on which he had been away, and he pacified her with a tale that he had ordered some flowers to be sent to her, and had forgotten to call as arranged to decide a point in regard to their selection.

"You were not with me, child, and I thought I could not better fill in the time than by doing something to please you."

"We could have called together about them," said the widow, who was sorry to have missed an opportunity of shopping in the company of her handsome lover.

"True, but I wanted them to be a surprise. And now you have got everything out of me. When you ask me anything, Dora, out must come the whole truth, whether the thing be grave or trivial. You have spoilt my little plot altogether," he said, smiling, and kissing her.

She believed him implicitly, of course, and was flattered at the little attention which the imaginary act implied.

"I can't help wondering where on earth that child Dessie has got to," she said, after a pause. "It's such an extraordinary thing to have done."

"She is a woman journalist, Dora. There is an explanation of any amount of eccentricity in that."

"Not in the least. She's the most level-headed little soul on the face of the earth—at least she used to be." She made the qualification, remembering the girl's unaccountable dislike of de Montalt.

"Then in that case, why not accept her explanation? She implies she has gone away on business."

"But she doesn't say where. Besides, she's been so peculiar the last few days—ever since we came to town. I don't understand her a bit," and she frowned and shook her head in perplexity.

The subject did not interest her lover just then. He had for his part exhausted the possibilities of the girl's action, had taken such precautions as he could to guard against its interfering with his plans; and thus Mrs. Markham's vapid speculations bored him. There was another subject he had much nearer at heart; the date for their marriage, and he had resolved to press this forward now with all reasonable speed.

He approached the subject again now, taking it up where he had left it on the previous night; and after saying that he had had letters which would necessitate his leaving England for a time very shortly, suggested that he would let her decide whether the marriage should take place before his departure or after his return.

The widow on her side was all eagerness, and they were in close consultation when Tom Cheriton was shown in.

He glanced round the room in evident disappointment at not seeing Dessie there, and his first question was for her.

"It is most unaccountable, Mr. Cheriton," said Mrs. Markham. "But first let me make you two gentlemen known to one another," and she introduced them. The impression which each formed of the other was exceedingly unfavourable.

"A scoundrel," was Cheriton's inward verdict. "A bulldog," was the other man's thought, while both murmured a word or two of civility.

"There is a telegram for you, Mr. Cheriton," said Mrs. Markham, handing it to him. "We've no doubt it's from Dessie." He tore it open quickly, and a glance told him the contents.

"Strange," he said thoughtfully. "She brought me up on purpose to see her. Do you know anything of this, sir?" he asked de Montalt, abruptly with a sharp keen glance.

"I? Certainly not. How is that possible?"

"Anything is possible, as an Old Bailey practice soon teaches you," returned Cheriton, brusquely. "What is your opinion of her sudden step, Mrs. Markham? You know her well."

"I can't understand it at all," was the reply. Mrs. Markham was nettled at Cheriton's tone toward her lover. "She tells me in a telegram that it's a sudden commission of work. But I'm bound to say I can't think that's all. She's been very peculiar all the time she's been here."

"Peculiar?" echoed Cheriton, pricking up his ears. "In what way do you mean peculiar?"

"Out of sorts. You know what I mean. Not like herself. Dull, low spirited. I thought she was ill. I found her looking very faint and ill once. You remember—yesterday, Godefroi?"

"She explained that was due to Mr. Cheriton's absence," said the Count, not liking Cheriton's manner at all.

"Dull, low-spirited, and not like herself. I suppose that wasn't the welcome she gave when she first met you, Mrs. Markham?" he asked, in his persuasive cross-examining smile and manner.

"Oh, no," replied the widow. "That's the curious part. She seemed all right then. It was not till that evening or the next day that I noticed the change."

"She was all right, Mrs. Markham; for I saw her an hour or two before she came to you, and she was altogether in her usual spirits." He paused, and then wheeling round on de Montalt, he repeated his question.

"And are you quite sure still that you know nothing at all of the cause of this absence, sir?"

"I have replied once. I am not accustomed to be questioned in this way. I am not responsible for this young lady's eccentricities."

"Well, we shall see. You will excuse me now, Mrs. Markham. Dessie says in her wire that she is writing to my chambers, and I will go there. I am not at all satisfied; and must look into things at once." With that, he left, shaking hands with Mrs. Markham and bowing very stiffly to her companion.

CHAPTER XIII

AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW

When Dessie reached Middlesbridge she was a little at a loss to know how best to get to see her sister. She did not know whether the nurses lived in the Infirmary, or even whether her sister was on the regular staff. There had been no communication between them for a long time past, and the last letter had only stated the fact baldly that Daphne was going to join the nursing staff of the Infirmary.

Middlesbridge was a dirty industrial town, the centre of the Northern iron trade, with a dirty river, along the southern bank of which lay the chief works, which kept the Infirmary well stocked with bad "smashes"—as accidents to the workers were called—and gave the hospital quite a reputation as a place where varied and constant practice in surgery could be gained.

But Nurse Morland had gone to it for reasons altogether unconnected with nursing experience. It lay off the highway of the world, and only the barest handful of the sixty or seventy thousand of useful human beings who peopled the hive knew anything of life outside it. It was a safer refuge than a desert.

Dessie found her way on foot to the Infirmary, and was going to call and ask for her sister when it occurred to her that she had better send her a letter to prepare her for the visit. A sudden meeting, if a stranger chanced

to be present, might call forth some word or sign which might lead to embarrassing consequences.

She turned back, therefore, and entering a shop wrote a very brief line saying that an extraordinary need had arisen compelling her to come to Middlesbridge, and asking her to say when they could meet and where. She was to send word by the bearer.

She got a boy to take the note and wait for an answer, and she watched him as he went up the semicircular carriage-drive that was in front of the building, and saw him deliver the letter to the porter. After a long interval he returned and gave her a note.

"Call here in an hour."

Then the girl remembered that she had yet to find some place to stay at. She went back first to the station to find out how late she could leave, in the hope that the interview with her sister would be over in time to let her leave and travel by night, and having made a note of the train times she went away to get something to eat. She felt faint and weary, and remembered that she had had nothing since breakfast at Edgcumbe Square. Excitement had made her forget food; but she compelled herself now to eat a substantial meal, and then made some inquiries as to an hotel.

Punctually at the expiration of the hour she returned to the Infirmary; and on asking for Nurse Morland, she was shown up to a room, where, instead of her sister, the matron, a very sharp-eyed, clever, quick-looking, little woman, received her, and poured in a volley of questions shrewdly and somewhat brusquely put to ascertain her business.

Dessie listened quietly, and answered very generally, parrying the questions deftly. She was moved by a sort of antagonism until her questioner let out that her mo-

tive was a fear lest Dessie had perhaps come to try and take Nurse Morland away, while the matron did not want to lose her.

"You're the first friend that's been to see her for a very long time, you know," she said, shaking her head and looking as though the fact was very suspicious; "and I think well enough of her to wish to keep her."

"I haven't the remotest thought of enticing her away," answered Dessie, smiling at the matron's manner. "It is many years since I saw Nurse Morland. We are very old friends; and it occurred to me to come and see her, all unexpectedly."

At this moment Nurse Morland entered the room. A quick glance shot from her eyes to Dessie's face, and the latter read it as a warning. Then, in a somewhat formal manner, but in a voice of exquisite sweetness and depth, she said, putting out her hand:

"It is very good of you to come and see me, Miss Merrion. It is a long time indeed since we met. Will you come with me to my little room? The matron will excuse you." There was a quiet air of masterful force in every syllable and action; and without another word the two sisters left the room together. Murmuring such commonplaces as two friends might speak who had not met for some time, they went to a small room, at the end of a long corridor, in which were two beds; and there, as soon as they were alone, the elder sister let drop from her face the mask of impassiveness she had worn.

She shut and locked the door carefully.

"All ears are on the strain for gossip and scandal here, and every tongue in the place is always itching to wag. Speak low, as somebody's sense of duty may bring them to the keyhole; and now, tell me, Dorothy, what in heaven's name this surprise visit means?"

Dessie looked at her sister with emotions, in which the old sisterly affection, admiration for her beauty, as conspicuous as ever now, and astonishment at her present conduct were mingled.

"You have not kissed me, Daphne," she said.

"You have not come all this way merely to be kissed," answered the elder, with a gesture of impatience and temper. But the words had scarcely left her lips before she threw her arms round Dessie and embraced her with vehement energy, twining her strong arms round the girl and pressing hot, fierce kisses on her cheeks and lips. Dessie was almost frightened at this tempestuous change; but the love in her own heart was roused, and on her side she answered the caresses with fervent warmth. And in this way some time was passed, the two sisters locked in each other's arms, and speaking scarcely a word.

At length the elder broke away and sat down on the bed opposite that on which Dessie sat, and held the girl's two hands in her own.

"What lamentable weakness," she cried, impetuously. "And yet how sweet to be weak sometimes, and not always to lock away, as in an iron chest, every natural desire, prompting, and thought, and be for ever playing a part. Daphne Marlow had better never have been born than to be for ever nothing but Nurse Morland."

Dessie sat watching her sister as she spoke, thinking what a magnificent and altogether strange woman she had become. Daphne was tall for a woman, with an exquisitely proportioned figure, the strength and suppleness of which had been well developed by her calling. But it was her face and head that compelled attention. The features were all regular and in perfect harmony with the shape of the face which tapered from a broad

and rather high brow to the chin. Everything suggested force, thought, and self-reliance. The colouring, too, was as remarkable as the pose of the head was beautiful. The flesh was white, with the clear, deep whiteness of alabaster, and the striking pallor was relieved by lips of a rich red, lustrous eyes and heavy brows and lashes all of a deep blackness. Above this remarkable face was a wealth of hair, pure red gold in hue, of extraordinary fineness and quite wonderful profusion. She had long since ceased to dye it, and had allowed it to grow again. Even gathered up under the sober cap of the nurse, the hair suggested that crown of woman's glory which the hair is to certain women.

It was her hair that she had cut away in the old days, as the outward symbol of her severance from that world in which she had played so conspicuous a part to achieve only such a dazzling fall.

Daphne's experienced eyes were also reading the state of her sister's mind as reflected in her face, where she saw the evidence of trouble or illness.

"You're not as strong as you used to be, Dorothy," she said, when the girl did not reply promptly to her former remark.

"I am well enough bodily. I had a bad attack of typhus fever a few months ago, and have had a little difficulty in getting back my strength. It is not my body that is suffering. There is trouble."

"Of course. You wouldn't come without a cause of that kind, I presume," was the impetuous, half-angry reply. "What is the trouble? Do you want me to help you, or do you come to disturb me?" The paroxysm of affection had entirely passed from her. She loosed her sister's hand, and sat with a half-aggressive, half-antagonistic air.

"I have come on what may prove to be a very sad errand," began Dessie, and her sister interrupted her with a short, half-satirical laugh.

"That's how goody-goody people always begin when they have something particularly unpleasant to say or do. Look here," she continued, with a quick change of tone, speaking with voluble energy. "Hear this. For six years or seven years you have never troubled yourself to come near me. I have lived a puritanical existence that any saint might be proud of. Not a soul has a suspicion that my heart is not bursting with charity and love for the noble calling which this betokens"—touching her uniform—"not a soul believes that I do not regard it as my mission from God—a mission to minister to the sick—ugh. Wait a minute; let me finish. I am content; or, at least, so far content that I haven't laid hands on my own life. And what is more, I see relief opening out ahead of me. I am going to be married. Do you understand? To marry a man who is in love with my face and figure; my beautiful body; and with the saintly mind that inspires the nurse's calling! He is a good man, and I love him, too, in a way. Now, mark me, if a word that you have to say will interfere with that prospect, don't utter it. Go away; leave it unsaid. Go and forget me; put me out of your thoughts again. Pack the memory of me away on the shelf in your mind, where you store the ugly things you never want to think of again. But don't venture to say, or even to think, a word that is in the least likely to come between me and my purpose. I won't endure it. I won't." She spoke almost fiercely at the close, and what she said made Dessie so thoughtful that she scarce knew how to begin.

"Ah, I'm glad I warned you in time," said Daphne,

again, seeing her sister pause. "I mean it. Every word, and more. I won't hear a word. You know what you told me after mother died. You know your promise. To do anything and everything in your power to help me to the right way. Well, I vow to you"—she spoke now hurriedly, and with concentrated and almost bitter intensity—"if you do this now, I will toss aside in an instant the whole solemn lying of the last seven years, and get back to the old daring life, the desire for which burns always in me like an unslakable fire."

"That is not the attitude of a strong woman," said Dessie, quietly.

"Perhaps not; but it is the resolve of a determined one. I am only warning you. You have come to me, not I to you. I am only telling you what the consequences will be if you interfere. I have been strong, God knows, for seven years. Jacob never served to win Rachel as I have served to win respectability; and now you come and threaten everything. Go away. Rather than breathe a word, go away now, with every syllable unspoken. I'll take the risk of your silence. It's easier to fall straight from a fool's paradise into hell than to climb the weary treadmill of this dull, dreary, sordid, earthly round."

"It is out of the question for me to go away without saying what I have come to say," answered Dessie, quietly. "But I certainly have not come to dissuade you from taking any course you believe best for you. I am compelled to reopen the past, however, and I am afraid that I must hurt you. Tell me first, do you know this man?" She put into her hands the photograph of the Count de Montalt.

The moment Daphne's eyes fell on the handsome, self-confident face, it was clear that she recognised him.

"What is this man to you?" she asked Dessie, her whole manner altered.

"Personally, nothing. But he is engaged to be married to a dear friend of mine—one who saved my life in the illness I told you of just now."

"Then let them marry, and do you keep out of his way for the rest of your life. No more terrible man breathes than that." She frowned at the face with a gesture of hate. "Leave him to go his course alone, and keep out of his way, if you value anything you possess from your life downwards."

"I cannot do that," answered Dessie. "And it is because I cannot that I am here."

"I will have nothing to do with it. If you attempt to struggle with that man, you will lose as surely as you are a woman and he a man."

"Nevertheless I will not flinch, if you can answer my questions satisfactorily," answered Dessie firmly. "What has he ever been to you?"

"I shall not tell you."

"Has he any hold over you? Could he do you any harm?"

"He could never find me."

"But if he could find you?"

"No, none."

"You mean that, Daphne?"

"Why do you cross-examine me like this?" asked the other, angrily. "Don't I tell you? Shall I protest, and mouth and swear it?"

"What is his name?" asked Dessie, after a pause.

"If he is to marry your friend, you must know that well enough."

"I know him now as the Count de Montalt. He has

once before crossed my path as Rolande Lespard; what was he called to you?"

"I will not tell you. It would open up a sealed chapter."

"As you will. Then I will tell you. He was known as Adolphe Colimbert, half English, half French, and was mixed up in a hundred wild and lawless deeds. You need not say more about him unless you like; but one thing I ask you to tell me fully in all confidence—How came the Indian envoy Maiwand, by his death? And how did the Star of the Rohilkund Crescent get into Colimbert's possession?"

The questions were asked in a quiet matter of fact tone, but the effect of them upon the elder sister was startling enough. She sat with her face hard set, her lips pressed together, and her brows knitted, while her breath seemed to come from a bosom labouring with emotion.

"Where did you get to learn anything of this?" she asked, after a long pause.

"By a chain of coincidences that are as strange as I fear they are dangerous. When I first threw aside the old life and started as Dessie Merrion, I had an adventure at Birmingham station which resulted in my getting possession of the jewels." She described briefly what had happened and the letters she had received. "I thought little about them till quite recently, when in the man my friend, Mrs. Markham, was going to marry, I recognised the murderer Lespard. I taxed him with it——"

"Oh! you little fool," cried Daphne, involuntarily. "It was as much as your life was worth."

"It was. He tried to take it the very next day; and then stole some papers which gave him a clue to my

identity. After that, within a few hours, he had all our history, and he threatened me with exposure. I asked him then how he got possession of the jewels, and he answered me in a way that frightened me. This morning I myself went to Scotland Yard in my character of a journalist, and the whole story was told to me by the very inspector who had the matter in hand at the time."

"What did he say? How do you mean that I am implicated?"

"You know how you were called at the time. The inspector told me plainly that you were suspected of having formed the plot to get the whole of the Indian's jewels from him; that you were suspected of having killed him; and that immediately after the m—— the deed, you disappeared, and had never been seen since. Adolphe Colimbert disappeared in the same way, and has also never been found. The belief was that you had gone away together—but I know different."

Daphne Marlow sat with bowed head while the story was being told, as if not daring to look her sister in the face. At the close she looked up.

"Do you believe me guilty of that?" she asked, as if challenging her sister.

"That is the very question I have come to ask. If not, then this man's threats to expose me are empty. He will probably threaten next to denounce you. But I shall know that to be an empty boast also. Will you tell me the truth?"

Dessie had purposely spoken in a perfectly unimpassioned voice, unwilling to add to what she felt must be her sister's intense agitation; but her own emotions at that moment passed beyond her control, and after a pause, in which she waited breathlessly for an answer that did not come, she put her hand on her sister's and cried:

"Tell me the truth, for Heaven's sake, Daphne."

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"Tell me the truth, for heaven's sake Daphne. All I care for in life may hang upon it," and she remained thus waiting eagerly while her sister appeared to be wrestling with feelings which prevented her from replying.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRUTH

THE two sisters sat for a long time in silence, each impressed by the critical gravity of the position. The younger tried to put the strongest reserve upon herself, and the elder was manifestly overcome by the rush of thoughts which her sister's words had loosened. Her face became very stern and hard, the frown on the forehead giving to the features an expression that was almost repelling.

"I do not know how to answer you, Dorothy," she said, at length. "I cannot tell you the whole story—I will not, in fact; and yet without telling you I cannot make you understand. I am not a murderess in fact. That is, I did not kill that wretched Maiwand. Make your mind easy on that score—that is to say, if your mind is one of those British ones which holds a man or woman innocent of murder so long as their hand has not actually dealt the death blow. But he owed his death to me; and I, like a fearsome fool, so acted that if I were charged to-morrow with the crime and the facts were even fairly told, there are not a dozen men in England who would not think me guilty. There you have my secret then," she cried, with angry emphasis. "I have lived the last seven years with the full knowledge that if ever the police found out who I was, I should be condemned for the murder of that man. That is a sword which no woman can carry about in her heart, and yet remain young. At least, so I thought. But now—"

She paused and her sister made no attempt to speak. What had been said let her see clearly enough now that the hold which the man Count de Montalt had, was even much greater that she had feared.

"Do you think he knows where I am?" asked Daphne, sharply, after a long and painful pause.

"I can't say yet. But I am so afraid of him that he seems to me likely to know anything."

"Had you it written anywhere among your papers?"

"Only in one place. There is an entry in a diary of mine, simply the name 'Nurse Morland,' and the address. But the diary is in a safe in my own rooms. He cannot have got to that?"

"Cannot!" exclaimed the other, with a gesture of impatience. "You don't know him if you think that. When he once held the clue he got when searching your box, he would ransack every nook and cranny where you would probably or improbably keep such a thing. He must have found the name Marlow somewhere; and that accounts for his knowing everything else. He is no wizard; only a man of infinite cunning, and as daring as a man can be. Our one chance is that he does not know where I am. He has sought me for years."

At that moment they were interrupted by a knock at the door, and the elder sister, removing rapidly the signs of her emotion, opened it at once.

"Nurse Morland, the matron says that No. 37 is not so well, and can you go to her?"

"I must go on duty now, Dessie," she said turning to her sister, while the maid waited. "I am glad to have had a chat over old times. I will call and see you to-morrow morning. You are probably staying at the Queen's Hotel?"

"Yes, you will find me there in the morning. Come

as early as you can, as I am going on before the afternoon."

"If you give my name at the Queen's, you will find Mrs. Smith very pleasant. I nursed her through an illness, and she thinks I saved her life."

In this way they parted, and Dessie, feeling more forlorn and miserable than she had ever felt before in her life, hurried away to make arrangements at the hotel to stay the night. The mention of Nurse Morland's name proved a good introduction, and saved her from having to give any reason for the somewhat equivocal fact that she was travelling alone and without luggage.

She passed a desolate night. Even at the darkest point of her life she had had hope in the future; but now she could not perceive a single ray anywhere. She was absolutely in this man's power, to do with as he pleased, and out of this a new dread grew during the night's thoughts.

It was that she would not be able to tell Tom Cheriton; and no one knew better than she that that must mean their parting. Looming in the distance she saw the terrible alternative of having to maintain an impenetrable silence in regard to everything, or of having to see her sister stand in the dock on a charge of murder, with an almost certain conviction to follow.

Before the prospect of such a choice she shrank and trembled like a child. It was as she had said. All that she held dear in life hung on the issue.

In the morning she was up early and had breakfast in her own room. She resolved to go out for a short walk, as her head was aching violently, and then return and wait for her sister. As she was going down the stairs to pass through the hall she had an additional shock.

Sir Edmund Landale was standing there, speaking to

a waiter and asking the way to the Middle Riding Infirmary.

What could that mean? She was quick now to scent danger in any new incident, and after a moment's pause of indecision, she determined that there was less risk in speaking to him and endeavouring to find out his business than in remaining ignorant of it.

He showed little or no surprise at seeing her; and Dessie noticed it.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked; and the question confused him so that he hesitated and stammered.

"I had to come here—" he began.

"The day before yesterday morning you wrote that you were going to call at my rooms to see me. Not a soul knew of my coming here. Why then—" She stopped and paused. Her own question had given her a clue that startled her; but she acted upon it with instant readiness and very shrewdly. She steadied herself for the effort, and in a matter-of-fact tone, she added: "When you saw the Count de Montalt at my rooms, he gave you no reason to think I should be here. He told me nothing about your coming north either. You dropped no hint of it to him, did you?"

He stared at her, as if trying to get at her meaning; his weak features so expressive of doubt and perplexity, that for the moment Dessie feared she had made a mistake. But she went on with it.

"If you told him anything, then I can only conclude that he has played me false. He knew perfectly well that I should not have come here, had I thought to meet you. The reasons which made me keep away, even from my own rooms, when you were going to call there, would have had ten times their strength in such a case as this."

The Baronet saw the discrepancy in her words, and gave away the important secret in the eagerness to score the little point against her.

"You have just now said that he could have told me nothing, because at that time you had not even formed the plan in your own thoughts. I could not therefore have come down on any but my own initiative."

"Do you mean that this meeting is the result of pure chance, Sir Edmund?"

"Don't say 'Sir' Edmund, Dessie," he said. "Try and be a little less hard with me. What I said in my letter is all absolutely true. Come out; you've got your things on, I see. I'll tell you the whole cause of my being down here. You don't know the influence you have with me. I'll do anything you like, anything you tell me, if only you'll listen to me."

It was all plain enough to the girl now, and it was with a feeling of dismay that she followed her companion out of the hotel.

"Well," she said, when for some time he made no attempt to speak, "what have you to tell me?"

"I'm going to make a confession to you. I've been within an ace of behaving a brute to you again. You can believe me or not, as you please, but I swear to you it's true what I wrote. I've been looking for you for months —for years, indeed—ever since we parted. I didn't know then how much you were to me; now, I——"

"I am engaged to marry Mr. Cheriton, Sir Edmund; and I cannot let you talk in this way."

"I know you're engaged, and it was that that maddened me when the Count de Montalt told me. It seemed such bitter disappointment just when I'd found you, to hear that we were further apart than ever. Are you sure you care for him——"

"Yes, quite. As sure as that I have long since ceased to care for or even think about, you," said Dessie, curtly. "But you asked me to come out that you might tell me the cause of your being here."

"It's not much good telling you anything, if that's the way you can speak to me, after all the years we have known one another," said the man doggedly, after a pause.

"Well, but did you think that, after you had treated me as no honourable man ever yet treated a woman, I should be waiting and eating my heart out for love of you—all eagerness to fall into your arms the moment you held up a beckoning finger?"

"You loved me, then," he answered, looking at her with the sullen look of a weak, selfish man, angry through disappointment.

"I did many odd things in those days. I know the world now, and have purchased my experience. I certainly do not love you now"—she said this with a short laugh. "You can pride yourself on having done one thing thoroughly, at any rate, in your life—disillusioned me."

"But I want you. I have found out I cannot live without you," he said, earnestly. "I have never ceased to repent my abominable conduct. I see now how abominable it was."

"It is a tardy awakening—and a useless one, so far as I am concerned. Never in all my life will you stand in my memory unconnected with that time of callous cowardice."

"You are very bitter. It is not a Christian reception of repentance."

"Christian!" she repeated, looking at him with a frown of amused doubt. "Christian! Since when have

you resumed the cant of those chapel days? I should have thought you had shaken that off with your other weaknesses. But I am not a Christian in that sense, thank you," and Dessie shrugged her shoulders.

"You mean by this attitude that you will not listen to me?"

"If you mean by listening to you, letting you make love to me in this style of infatuated folly with the least idea that I can ever be more to you than I am now—sorry that I ever knew you, that is—I will not listen to you. But I will listen readily enough if you tell me why you are here."

"You are the reason. I mean what I say," he continued, with that repetition which weak men take for doggedness and resolution. "I want you. I cannot live without you. You will have to be my wife. I have come down here now because of that resolve. I know your sister is here; and I can save you from the exposure which you dread now as much as ever. Now you know what I mean, and why I am here."

If he had known how much he had frightened her, he would have felt more confidence than he showed. But she steadied herself not to let him see what a blow he had struck.

"I must undeceive you," she said, quietly. "Even if you have as keen a willingness as you used to have to use any means you can think of to strike at me, you are powerless in this matter. You are apparently being made a tool of by a man cleverer and more subtle than yourself, and he has persuaded you that he can give you some kind of power over me to break me to your will. Try it," said Dessie, stopping and looking with a confident smile into his face. "Try it. Go to Mr. Cheriton. Tell him all you know of me. Go where you will to expose

me. But remember that now I have the whip hand, not you. When I was a governess you could go to my employer, and the whisper of a lie was enough to turn me adrift. But try it with a woman journalist. Why, your knowledge of the world will tell you that the only effect would be to give me a splendid advertisement for my works, and create a boom in my books. Think of it—a woman writer, with a real past! No, no, Sir Edmund, melodrama is as dead as morality. And if one's code of morals and manners hadn't changed I shouldn't have listened to you for a moment. You must try something else."

"I will try whatever comes my way," he answered savagely and sullenly. "You set me at defiance, then?" he asked.

"I don't do anything so ridiculous. I merely tell you that I can never marry you and that the sooner you put away all thoughts of anything of the kind the better. For the rest, go back to your instructor and get him to give you a better and more honourable part to play."

"You are very blunt," he said, and he flushed with anger. "I'll be equally blunt. I shall go through with this. I won't give up the chance of winning you, by fair means or foul, till you're married to this man, who has come between us—and perhaps not then. So I warn you," and then thinking he had made rather an impressive speech, he raised his hat and left Dessie, who stood looking after him, half laughing at the absurdity, half afraid of what his spite might do.

Then she went back to the hotel slowly and thoughtfully; and the first message that greeted her was that Nurse Morland had called and was waiting to see her.

CHAPTER XV

DESSIE'S RESOLVE

A GLANCE at her sister's face told Dessie that she too had passed an anxious night. The expression was now very hard, but the lines on the face seemed to have deepened.

"I have still worse news for you than yesterday," said Dessie. "Your fears as to this man's recklessness were a safer guide than my belief in my own precautions. I have found out that he went to my rooms in my absence, and of course ransacked the place, finding out everything. He knows where you are; and he sent a man here, following me, to see what happened, and probably to watch your movements."

"How do you know this?" asked the other, in a tone that seemed dulled with suffering.

"I have seen the man and spoken to him. It is Sir Edmund Landale."

"A gentleman to do spy's work?"

"No, not a gentleman: only a mean pitiful scoundrel to whom accident has given wealth and a title," and she told her sister briefly her former relations with Landale, his conduct, and the purport of the conversation that morning.

"How much does he know?" asked Daphne, at the end.

"I cannot tell. I have no idea." Then a long pause followed.

"I can see no escape," said the elder sister—"save one," she added in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"And that is?"

"We must let things go on as they will. I have been thinking of it all night, and I wonder the poor wretch I was nursing didn't die under my hands. Don't think I'm afraid. I'm not such a coward as that. I have piled up these flintstones for a bed, and I won't flinch and cry out because I have to lie on them. If I could have spared myself the ordeal I would have done it; but I cannot. It is hard; damnably hard,"—the oath was a sudden gust of passion that seemed to shake her violently—"but every woman has to suffer in this world. But if I have to go through with this, and I escape, I'll have the man's life that exposes me."

"It will never come to that, Daphne," said her sister, dismayed at the other's concentrated passion; but the elder took no notice of the interruption, and continued speaking very slowly.

"I wonder—but men are poor things. Yet I've a mind to try him. I told you yesterday there is a man here who vows that he loves me, that he would go through—but there, you know a man's vows, I suppose. But this, I believe is a good man, sincere, and honest, and true. We were to have been married soon, but now—"

"But you couldn't have married him without telling him the past, Daphne," said her sister, when she paused.

"Couldn't? Why not? Do men tell their future wives all the secrets of their past?" Her sneer ended in a sigh expressive of the predominant feeling. "But never mind. It is all over. I can't go to him and say—'I am likely to be tried for murder, and if tried to be convicted. Will you fly the country for my sake and with me?' And

yet—" here her voice sank again to a whisper of despair —"if I lose him I care nothing what lies ahead."

The mixture of raillery, passing sneers and unmistakable misery affected the younger girl till she could not speak; and the fresh pause was broken by Daphne, who spoke more decidedly.

"I can take only one course with you, Dorothy," she said. "I shall leave you absolutely free to seek your own happiness your own way. I had some thought during the night of appealing to you to try and save me from what has to come. But I will not do that. I cannot. I have not a vestige of right. You gave the mother a pledge that if at any time the need arose you would do all that lay in your power to help me. I know you would now hold by that pledge, even if it cost you your happiness. But I will not let you. I won't accept the sacrifice. You could not make it ungrudgingly; and I want no unwilling help. I don't mean that unkindly," she said, seeing the girl wince, "but I know human nature."

Dessie made no attempt to speak.

"You had better do this. Go back to London—you can do no good here. You know all that has to be known. Take your own course. Set this man at defiance; but for God's sake be careful of your own safety. He would think no more of taking your life than he would of stamping on some venomous thing that threatened him. Be prepared for any action on his part, however wild, reckless, and desperate. He is capable of anything. I warn you—and not a soul on earth knows what he is capable of doing so well as I do. Wait a minute," she said, when her sister was going to speak, "I ask only one thing. Let me know the instant you have decided and have set him at defiance. Any form of warning will do; and after

that I can take my chance. I disappeared before, and can probably do so again. If not—"

"If not," echoed the other, questioningly.

"No matter."

"I understand you, of course," said Dessie, now much calmer. "And I will tell you what I mean to do. I shall not do what you propose. I should hate myself for ever for a contemptible thing if I bought my happiness at the cost of yours. Besides, what chance is there that either of us can be happy with that awful secret over our heads? Do you think I would marry a man that other people should be able to point at and say—his wife was the centre of such a scandal as this? Not for half the world. No, Daphne, your secret is safe in my keeping. What I have to do to keep it I will do. Heaven knows it's hard, but it is not so hard as to marry a man you love and to see his love die—as most surely it would—from the daily dropping of poison distilled from such a secret as this."

The elder sister sat listening with almost painful intensity; and when the other stopped she remained long silent, frowning, her brow contracted as if in pain, her fingers tightly interlocked, and her body swaying slightly to and fro.

"I must go," she said at length, speaking very heavily, and rising. "It is all a problem with no solution. If I were to fly, it would not help you. My death would not save you, as you look at the matter. If I gave myself up, it would only make matters worse. Promise me one thing," she said. "Do nothing rashly. I have one idea that may take shape. Do nothing too quickly."

"Everything must be settled quickly," returned Dessie. "And what hope can any delay give?"

With that the two sisters parted, and an hour later

Dessie was in the train on her way back to London, feeling even more baffled than before her visit. Before the interview with her sister there had been the faint hope that some link in the chain that bound her was weak or missing, but her sister's statements and admissions destroyed that hope completely; and what the girl had now to face was the dilemma in its ugliest, most repulsive, most threatening, and most perplexing form.

She had to choose between her friend and her sister. She must either keep silent, and let Mrs. Markham marry a man who was worse than many a wretch who had expiated his crime on the scaffold, or expose her sister to the certainty of a prosecution for murder, and to the probability of a conviction.

To herself and her own share of suffering she paid little heed. The thought of her sister having to stand in the dock to answer the charge of murder, and having the whole of the lurid facts of her past life brought out one by one in the course of a series of sensational examinations, so filled her imagination that it crowded out for the moment the thought of her own part. She became a necessary part of the tragedy, but only a minor part.

Her journalistic experience caused her to appreciate to the full the sensation which such a case would create. She had helped to work up others of the kind in which there was not a tithe of the incident and dramatic detail of this; and she knew how greedily every little incident and detail would be seized on and dressed up in readable "copy" for the million. There was material enough in the incidents to sell hundreds of thousands of extra papers.

Even her own story—with its extraordinary recovery of the Rohilkund jewels—would be worked up into a

series of sensations, each "palpitating with actuality," and making splendid "copy." It was possible, too, that if her sister with her awful past were charged with murder, Dessie herself might be charged as in some way an accessory in the theft of the jewels. When once public excitement and rage were excited, there was no knowing what victim would be claimed.

Now that she viewed her own conduct in the light of her present mood, she could not help seeing that very few people would believe her story of the way in which the rubies had come into her possession. She herself had before now poured scorn upon many a more probable story; and she could anticipate vividly the hundred tones of scepticism in which writers would ask where was the mysterious unknown who carried jewels worth a king's ransom in a handbag without knowing anything about it, and then opened an anonymous correspondence to give the jewels away!

When the whole country would thus be ridiculing and denouncing her, and she was proclaimed in the face of all the world as the possessor of jewels whose price had been murder, as a liar whose tale was too improbable for even a child to believe, and as the sister of a woman who had only ceased to be a public harlot when she became a murderess, what would her lover do—dear, brave, honest Tom Cheriton? What could he do?

A little glow of exultation warmed the miserable girl's heart as it harboured the thought that he would stand by her, believe in her, and know her to be true, despite all the world might say and think. To her that consolation would be enough; and for some minutes she pleased herself by thinking of it, and picturing the sturdy face and loving eyes of her betrothed standing quietly and firmly

by her side, cheering her with word and glance, and turning to face the whole sneering, gibing, threatening world in her defence.

She felt sure of him; but the test was one which could never be applied.

Let come what might, Daphne must never be betrayed. That was the one resolution which must dominate everything else. She must be saved at all hazards; and Dessie did not attempt to hide from herself what this involved for her.

First, it meant the separation of her lover and herself. She could not tell him the truth now; and she would not marry him without telling him. Even had she been able to tell him all, she would still have refused to be his wife. She was no fit wife for him. The shadow of some exposure hung over her. At any moment an accident might cut the thread by which the sword hung over her head, and it might fall. That was too great a burden to put on any man's love, too great a risk to thrust into his life. She loved Tom well enough to sacrifice herself to him; and too much to sacrifice him to herself.

When she had settled those two points—had fixed the main basis of her decision that her sister must be saved; and had faced the necessity to give up her lover—she was calmer and easily decided upon other points.

She would make the best terms possible with the Count; if possible to get him to abandon the marriage by giving him the jewels. If he would not forego the marriage she must devote her life to watching over the safety of her friend.

When the train reached Grantham her plans had sufficiently cleared for her to send a telegram to Mrs. Markham, saying that she would be back at her house that afternoon. Her intention was to go to South Kensington

after a hurried visit to her own rooms, to satisfy herself whether her rooms had really been visited by the Count in the manner she had heard from Sir Edmund Landale.

She was a brave, staunch little soul, but as she sat looking out upon the country through which the train rushed, she felt woefully forlorn, and weak and miserable. As the distance between her and London decreased so her sense of depression increased; and as the train was steaming under the series of short tunnels that cover the line close to the terminus, the thought occurred to her that in all the millions of hearts in the big city none was more gloomy and heavy laden than her own.

"I suppose I shall get over it in time," she thought. "They say that people get used even to penal servitude or to some long lingering, wasting illness; but to-day I can't feel that it's possible I shall ever shake off the awful weight that seems trying to drag me down. And to think it could never have happened if it had not been for that chance exchange of bags that day at Birmingham. What fools we are to think anything can be a trifle!"

When the train drew up in the station she jumped out quickly and walked at a brisk pace along the platform; but she had barely left the carriage when she met the Count de Montalt, who raised his hat, and greeted her with his usual overdone politeness.

"It was thoughtful of you to let me know that you would arrive by this train, Miss Merrion. The moment Mrs. Markham showed me your telegram, despatched from Grantham, I guessed that you were en route, and a single reference showed me the time of your arrival. You knew, of course, that I should be anxious as to the result of your visit to your sister at Middlesbridge, and I presumed you wished to let me know it at the earliest moment. I thank you for your consideration. I always

appreciate little attentions of the kind, and am grateful. Well?"

It was easy to see that he was hiding some anxiety under this assumption of lightness.

"You know perfectly well, of course, that what you are saying has not the slightest shadow of foundation; and that the last thing in the world which I could desire is that you should be here to meet me, and give me a single unnecessary minute of your presence."

He twisted his moustache, and thrust one end of it between his teeth, keeping his eyes fixed on her closely as she spoke. He seemed to be balancing every word, and indeed attempting to interpret every tone of her voice.

"Well, I am here, at any rate," he said, conveying by his manner a suggestion that while he was naturally anxious to hear what she might have to tell him, he was still dangerous and to be feared.

"I am going first to my rooms; I think you know where they are," said Dessie, pausing and looking at him.

"I have been under the necessity of calling there for you in your absence," he replied, guessing instantly that she and Landale had met, and that she knew of his visit. "Though I did not see you yourself, it was not altogether a useless call," he added.

"I know now what you stole," answered Dessie.

"Do you think I am a thief?" he cried, as if indignantly. He stopped and looked at her with an expression of angry protest. They had left the station now and were in the Euston Road.

"I do not think it; I know it," answered Dessie, quietly.

"Ah, this is too much. We will test this now, if you

"Here, constable! This lady has been robbed."

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please. There is a policeman. If I am a thief you shall give me in charge at once. Here, constable," he called to the policeman, who came up leisurely and suspiciously, "this lady has been robbed, and she wishes to give the thief in charge. Now, you can do what you think best," and he looked at her, as if daring her to give him in custody.

"I have no charge to make. I do not want you," said Dessie, sharply, to the policeman, and walked away at a quick pace, the Count at her side, while the constable looked after them, puzzled for a moment, his perplexity evaporating in a smile, as he scanned them very shrewdly and mentally catalogued them as a "couple of rum 'uns;" and then resumed his beat, turning now and again to glance after them, till they crossed the Euston Road and were lost in the distance.

"I understand all now," said the Count, quietly. "And I congratulate you on your excellent common sense. You have found out now that when I say a thing I mean it, and that what I threaten, I can perform." He was confident and sanguine again now. The little incident had shown him that Dessie did not mean to set him at defiance, and thus interfere with his plans; and with that all his anxiety vanished.

He had still a point to make, as he meant to drive home the conviction into her mind that her only safe course was absolute silence and secrecy. He would accept no other terms.

They walked some distance without exchanging a word, but when they were crossing one of the Squares near to her rooms in Bloomsbury the Count said:—

"I have no wish to trespass any longer than is necessary, Miss Merrion; and, indeed, I am overdue in South

Kensington. If you will take one turn round this Square, I can say all I wish to say."

"We had better go on to my rooms," answered Dessie, curtly. "They are close here, as you know. We can then speak without interruption, and I have probably more to say to you than you to me."

"As you will," he assented, airily; and they finished the walk without another word.

As they entered, the housekeeper came to tell Dessie that Tom Cheriton had called more than once the day before, and again that morning. Then she recognised the Count, and he saluted her gaily with a laugh.

"More successful this time, you see," he said. "Not got to wait a long time to-day without seeing Miss Merrion;" and the woman curtsied in remembrance of his two shilling tip. "Saves you the trouble of your asking her to identify me," he added, lightly, to Dessie, as they went up the staircase. "And that was, of course, one of your reasons for bringing me here." Dessie made no answer. His impudent audacity appeared to baffle her. Then he threw himself into a chair, and, looking round, said: "There's not much out of order, you'll find. I'm sorry I couldn't manage to shut the safe again. That's the only thing; but if you'll get it done and send me the little bill, I will be only too pleased to settle it. It's been a splendid investment."

"You need not boast about having come to the place like the thief you are——"

"Stay, Miss Merrion, please," he cried, in an altered tone. "Don't make this business harder than it need be by this kind of insult. Time presses, and we have more to do than lose our tempers. In the first place, listen to me, for now I am in deadly earnest"— his manner was

in thorough keeping with his words. "I know perfectly well your errand to the north. I know what you have found out there—because I know the truth. I know the alternative course you have to decide; and I can see how you have decided. You have resolved to hold your tongue; and a very wise decision, too, if you want to save your sister's neck and your own identity and history and false name from being the public property of every reader of every half-penny sensational rag in the country. You've fought the game well, and you're a plucky girl, but all the pluck in the world can't fight down the odds against you. You know my terms—secrecy for secrecy, with restoration of the Rohilkund rubies. But mark you, not a sign or sound or syllable of what you know to any living soul. And mark this—least of all to Mr. Cheriton. I know you will be tempted to tell him. But breathe a single word to him, and I swear by the devil that the very moment I hear of it I will tell the police where to lay hands on the notorious Red Delilah. You know what will follow. This is no child's-play. Now what do you say?"

He read in her face all that it meant to her; but he read also that he was sure to win, and that she dared not refuse. He waited, therefore, without impatience while she fought for enough self-command to reply.

"On certain conditions," she said steadily, though her voice was low, "I will hold my tongue; but only on conditions."

"And give up the jewels to me?"

"And give up the jewels to you."

"Do then, and you will find me grateful." He stopped as his quick ear caught the sound of footsteps on the staircase, and with a rapid instinct of self-preservation,

he added with passionate concentration—" But remember, not a word or hint to a soul as you value your sister's life."

The words were scarcely out of his lips when a hurried knock was struck on the door panel, the handle was turned quickly, and Tom Cheriton burst in excitedly.

" I heard from the housekeeper you were back, Dessie, but not that this gentleman was with you." He stopped midway in a rush to take the girl in his arms, and looking angrily at the Count, he asked—" What business have you here? "

A hot answer rose to the Count's lips, but he pressed it back, recognising the folly of pushing Dessie too far at such a moment.

" The merest accident," he answered courteously. " I was charged with a message to Miss Merrion from her friend, Mrs. Markham, and was so fortunate as to find her. I had delivered it, and was on the point of going when you arrived. Miss Merrion, I wish you good afternoon. You will not forget? " He shot one glance of warning at her as he turned.

" I shall not forget," she answered.

Tom Cheriton held the door open, and stared fixedly and insultingly at the Count as he went out, and continued to look for a few moments as he went down the stairs. Then he shut the door with a loud vicious slam.

" I hate that fellow, Dessie," he said, angrily. " And I swear I'd give five pounds to have helped him down the first flight with a kick. What did he want here, polluting the place? And what did he mean about telling you not to forget, and warning you with a look like that, eh? Why, girlie, you look ill and miserable. What on earth's the matter? " he asked, in a caressing tone, and went to

take her in his arms. But she shrank from him, and put out her hands to keep him off, saying:

"No, Tom. You must not come near me;" and when he looked at her in the deepest astonishment she threw up her hands. and with a heavy sigh, cried, "I am the most miserable girl in the world, and all is over between us!"

CHAPTER XVI

TOM CHERITON INTERVENES

Tom Cheriton continued to stare at Dessie until his astonishment had given way to sympathy, sympathy to speculation and speculation to close, shrewd, scrutinising inquiry.

"Well, my dear child," he said, at length, "I suppose you know what you're talking about, because, as a rule, you're a particularly sharp, level-headed little woman; but at present I'm in the dark, absolutely and completely, and must remain there until you tell me a little more about things."

"I can tell you nothing. T—Mr."—she stopped and hesitated, having begun to use his Christian name, and next tried in vain to bring out his surname.

He laughed; not boisterously or in amusement, but the encouraging, good-humoured, yet bantering laugh of a friend.

"That's no use, Dessie," he said, brightly, as he looked at her. "My name's Tom, not T, and considering the number of times I've kissed those lips, and they've kissed me, you can't be so hard on them as to expect they can still say 'Mr. Cheriton.' It's against human nature, Dessie." He repeated her name, and emphasised the repetition.

Dessie said nothing, and the man's heart ached as he saw that she was suffering keenly.

"What is the matter, Dessie?" he said, after a pause. "If you can tell me, do. I've been full of trouble about you since I saw your telegram and letter yesterday."

"I can't tell you anything, Tom," she answered. "I can't really. My lips are sealed. I can't say a word."

"Well, my dear, I shan't press you to speak, if you tell me that. If I am certain of anything on this earth, it is that you love me. There's only one thing I'm more certain of, and that is that I love you. I'm not saying that to swagger about it. I can't help loving you, Dessie, and I could no more put you out of my life than I could put an end to life itself; and God forbid I should ever harbour a thought of that kind."

He paused, and in an instant continued:

"For love like ours—and we're not a couple who wear the advertisement of our mutual feeling on our sleeves—there's only one possible foundation—absolute trust. It follows, then, that in a thing like this I cannot have the slightest shadow of a doubt that you are doing what you think best. You are making a howling mistake, of course. You'll come to see that some day." He paused to glance at her with a smile of cheering goodwill and confidence, "But, till then, nothing that you or anyone else on this great, glorious earth of ours can say, do, hint, act, or pretend can ever shake my confidence in you. You feel that?" He stopped for an answer this time, meaning to draw her to speak gradually.

"You don't understand, Tom," said the girl, when her lover appeared determined to wait till she did answer.

"No, I know that." he returned promptly. "Not yet, that is. But I mean to know all about it. No—" seeing her about to protest—"nothing you can say will stop me following this thing out to the end. I'm not without clues, already."

"You must promise me to make no inquiries," said Dessie.

"I shall promise nothing of the kind. Listen, Dessie. You have promised to be my wife. Up to two or three days ago there was not a cloud between us. Not a thought we did not share."

"That is not right, Tom," interposed Dessie. Her lover's protested intention to find out what had happened appealed to her fears, and roused her. "There must be an end to all secrecy—"

"A beginning, you mean," he interpolated.

"An end," she repeated quietly. "There has always been a secret between us. There was always something I had to tell you which all the same remained untold. Something connected with myself—my past life."

"Was it anything you meant to keep me ignorant of if we married, Dessie?" he asked quietly. "But there, why ask a thing like that? Do I believe you are a girl who would give yourself to a man when you thought there was anything in your life that rendered you unworthy, even in your own opinion? Psh! Do I believe the sun goes round the earth? Or that the Lord Chancellor is necessarily the best lawyer in the country? Or any other obvious fallacy?"

"You have never believed I could treat you in this way: Break my faith and my word without a word of explanation. And yet I'm doing it."

"Precisely; and the fact only shows me how strong you believe the necessity to be. But it doesn't prove you unfaithful to me," answered Tom, imperturbably. "Perhaps you'll ask me next to believe you've ceased to love me. No, no, Dessie. I'm not going to let you cheat me in this way. I'll just make it clear to you, however, what I really feel and believe."

"Tom, I give you my word that nothing you can say or do can alter this. Nothing you can find out can even affect the end in the slightest. All that can happen would be that you would see the inevitable necessity as clearly as I do now."

"Well, that would be something gained, at any rate," he answered with dry good humour. "For at present I see no necessity at all. Listen to me. Despite all you say about the secret that you were going to tell, but haven't yet told, you and I were in full expectation, three days ago, of being married. When we parted here with the thought, which was a little envious, perhaps, that Mrs. Markham was likely to be married before us, neither of us had the remotest idea that anything could happen to part us in any way, but certainly not like this. Had we?"

"It can do no good to think any more of this, Tom."

"Very well, then, it's clear, whether you answer or not, that whatever this is it is something that has happened since then. It is nothing on my side or to do with me, and it follows it must be to do with you. What has happened in the meantime, then? Obviously, the only thing of consequence is Mrs. Markham's return."

"Don't carry this any further, Tom," pleaded Dessie; but he paid no heed to her, and continued.

"Now, it's not to do with Mrs. Markham. Yes, I know that," he said, seeing Dessie start. "But it has to do with the man who is going to marry her. That I know from Mrs. Markham herself, because she said that you were the same as ever when you both met, but that she noticed the change afterwards—after you and this Count de Montalt had met. I know, therefore, where to look at the start. Now, one question, and even that I don't press: Is there anything you can tell me on that head?"

"No, Tom. All I ask you is that if you really care

for me you will not make any inquiry at all. Leave things where they are. Nothing can alter them."

"That I cannot consent to do for both our sakes, child. I would rather you told me everything freely and left me to judge; but if you cannot—and you may in some way have been forced and bound to secrecy—I shall be the last to press you. But I must find it out, even if I take that scoundrel by the throat and wring the truth out of him. And I'm capable of doing that in the last resort."

Dessie shook her head slowly, and lifting her hands let them fall with a gesture of despondency.

"It can do no good, Tom, not the least. If you wrung everything out of him it would only show you what this bar between us is, and how hopeless."

His knowledge of her was so shrewd that he could not but be impressed by her stolid insistence upon this; but he was vexed with himself at the same time for his inability to resist the feeling. Till this moment he had not gone very close to her side, but now he moved very quickly to her, and before she could resist his arm was round her waist, her hand fast clasped in his and her face close to his, while he spoke rapidly and with passion.

"Dessie, you must not cast me away like this. You haven't thought what you are doing. You haven't thought what it really is and all that it means to us both. You give me no word of reason or ground, but merely 'We must part. There is a bar which makes our marriage impossible.' That must not be. Do this. Marry me at once. I'll take you on trust, sweetheart, with all the barriers and everything else. If you don't love me there is no such thing as love anywhere. If you're not as genuine and true a little woman as ever breathed there is no genuineness in woman. Come, dearest, kiss me and say yes."

For a moment she clung to him, kissing him with quite unusual warmth, and he thought she was consenting. But it was only that she found it impossible to resist the temptation of the caress he offered, even though it should be the last.

"Don't make this harder for me than it is, dear," she whispered. "It is worse than death itself to part from you. But part we must. All I can say is that since we met last I have discovered a reason I did not know before, which makes it impossible for me to marry you. I am not fit to be your wife." She said the last words slowly and falteringly, and drooped her head.

Cheriton took his arm from her waist and placing both hands on her shoulders held her so that their faces were close together, and she could not help looking at him. He gazed kindly and gravely into her eyes, and then shaking his head, he said gently and with a smile,

"Dessie, for the first time since I've known you, you've told me what I can't believe. 'Not fit to be my wife.' My dear, that is not true—and don't ever say it again, or try to deceive me in that way. But I won't make this harder for you. God knows I can see it's hard enough. Listen, and don't try to break away. Kiss me once more. I don't give you up, Dessie. I won't. I don't care what you think the bar is—and I don't mean to let you continue to think what you do about it. You are a clever little body, but in this fight you're overweighted. That man's too many for you: and he frightens you. But he won't frighten me. And I'm going straight off now to see him."

"Don't go, Tom. Please don't. You don't know what you are doing. I know you want to do what is best: but do believe me this is impossible. You can only do harm. Please, please don't go to him."

"My dear child, anyone who plays on a woman's fears in the way this fellow is doing is a scoundrel to be faced by a man whom he can't bully, and not by a woman whom he can."

"But I have done this voluntarily. If I could alter it, I would not."

"Which only shows me his hold over you is all the stronger. But a thousand words won't move me from this purpose, child. I should be a craven fool if I refused to follow where my love, my instinct, and my judgment all point. Do you think I don't hold you worth a fight? Don't be too downcast, Dessie. This will turn out much less terrible than you think when I face it—and face it I will at once. Good-bye; you may kiss me. We're still just as much engaged as ever; and our marriage will scarcely be delayed an hour in consequence of it."

The girl kissed him, and his resolute confidence had some little effect in easing her mind; but she answered:

"It's no use. Nothing can do any good." Her tone was not so gloomy, however, and her lover noticed this with pleasure as he went out of the room with a smile and a cheery look. But his face gloomed and he frowned in deep perplexity before he reached the bottom of the stairs, so that the housekeeper who saw him leave the house thought he and Dessie had quarrelled.

As he walked away he was very troubled and anxious at all that had passed, but quite clear as to his first step. He would see the Count de Montalt, or whoever he was, and try to get from him a clue to the mystery.

He had first to go to his chambers. His uncle was no better, and Tom had felt great reluctance about staying in London the previous night. Telegrams were to be sent to him that day reporting progress, however, and his

object now was to ascertain if any had arrived during his absence, and also to arrange for their being sent on to him at South Kensington.

He was completely baffled by the turn which things had taken. It was clear that in some way this de Montalt had gained some strong and extraordinary influence over Dessie, but why should he use it to prevent their marriage? What on earth could it matter to that man whether Dessie was married or not? For a long time he could not get away from that thought, and by no ingenuity could he suggest an answer to the question.

Who was the man? There were several ways of attempting to find out a man's antecedents and past career; but in this case the task seemed the more difficult because he had absolutely nothing to go on. He knew no more about him than that he called himself the Count de Montalt, had picked up Mrs. Markham through George Vezey, and meant to marry her. Vezey himself knew nothing.

He was turning these considerations over and over in his thoughts all the way to South Kensington; and could get to no satisfactory conclusion.

He found Mrs. Markham and the Count together, and at once explained to the former that he wished to have a few minutes' conversation with her companion alone. The two men went at once to the library.

"I want to speak to you about Miss Merrion," said Tom, plunging right into the subject. "I have just had a long conversation with her, and I gather from it that you have some hold over her by which you have induced or compelled her to take a course which has plunged her into great unhappiness, and has caused her to break off her engagement to marry me."

"In what capacity do you come to me?" asked de Montalt, with a sneer. "Do you wish me to meddle in your love affairs?"

"No, I do not," said Tom, sternly. "And if you cannot speak civilly to me, I shall be glad if you will not speak at all."

The other man shrugged his shoulders as a reply.

"I ask you first—what is the nature of this hold you have?"

"Has Miss Merrion told you I have any hold at all?"

"Miss Merrion has not told me a syllable of any kind. You have seemingly closed her lips with your threats. But I am speaking of what I can see for myself."

"Then you had better carry your observations farther, and find out the answers to your own questions."

"Do you deny that you have put this pressure upon her?"

"I neither admit nor deny anything. I simply decline to answer you. I presume Miss Merrion is able to decide for herself; and if she doesn't like you, how can I compel her to marry you?"

"I will put it in this way," said Tom, passing over the insult. "In consequence of what has passed between you and Miss Merrion this change has been brought about. Will you give me any clue to the reasons for it?"

"If I had any I wouldn't give it," was the curt and angry reply.

"Very good," said Tom, firmly. "I have come in the first instance straight to you. I have other steps to take; and you will not suppose that I intend to let this matter alone until I have plumbed it to the bottom. I am not without means of ascertaining all that lies behind, and my practice as a criminal barrister has taught me to be suspicious of any man who trades on the fears of women

to compel them to be silent. You are doing that; and I will know the reason why. I warn you well in advance, and I hold a clue to your motives and your past which you have little anticipated would come my way."

"When you connect me with your criminal practice, you forget yourself, sir," said de Montalt, with an assumption of greatly offended dignity, as he rose and walked toward the door.

"I will come with you," said Tom readily. "My first intention is to explain your grossly dishonourable conduct to Mrs. Markham, and I prefer greatly to do it to your face;" and with that they returned to the room where they had left the widow. When they entered the room, however, there was a surprise for them both, as Dessie Merrion was in close conversation with her friend.

CHAPTER XVII

THE COUNT'S NEXT MOVE

DESSIE rose in some surprise not unmingled with alarm and agitation when the two men entered; and she directed a glance of somewhat eager appeal at Cheriton. But though he saw and understood the look, he answered it only by shaking his head and smiling to her.

"I am very glad you are here, Dessie, as what I have to say now concerns all who are present—you as well, Mrs. Markham, and I would much rather say it when we are all together." Mrs. Markham was a little perplexed by this opening, and looked toward her lover, who immediately went to her side and sat down, with a slight shrug of the shoulders and a lifting of the hands and eyebrows intended to suggest his complete inability to understand Cheriton's action.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Cheriton?" asked the widow.

"Yes, a great deal is the matter, and I want you to help to put things right. You know that Dessie——"

"Stop, Tom," interrupted the girl. "You know nothing can alter things. I have told you so. This can do no good."

"My dear girl, I am going my own way in this," he answered.

"Have you two quarrelled then?" cried Mrs. Markham, not without a suspicion of a smile. In her present

frame of mind a lovers' quarrel was about the most interesting thing on earth.

"Quarrelled? No, certainly not," cried Cheriton, with a smile. "Dessie and I would never think of doing anything like that. But between us there has come some kind of barrier which I think you—you and that gentleman—" waving his hand towards the Count, who smiled, "can help to remove. That is, if you will."

"If we will. Of course we will, won't we, Godefroi?" said Mrs. Markham, with ready good nature.

"I have already explained to Mr. Cheriton that I know nothing whatever about it, and can do nothing—much as I regret it." He added the last sentence as a sort of concession to Mrs. Markham's appeal.

"Whatever does it all mean?" she cried, looking in perplexity from one to the other. "Have you all got a lot of secrets?"

"It is the secret I wish you to help me to find," said Cheriton, an answer that puzzled Mrs. Markham more than ever.

"Why don't you ask Dessie?" she cried. "I don't understand."

"This shall all be made plain now, if you will give me one moment. On the day you were coming back—"

"Tom!" cried Dessie, with an interrupting protest.

"Dessie and I were just the same as usual," continued Cheriton, taking no notice of the interruption. "We had a cup of tea together and a chat, and both of us were looking forward to the time of our marriage. That evening she came here. You have already told me that she was in her usual spirits when she first met you, and that everything was just the same as usual. That evening she was introduced to this gentleman—"

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Markham, momen-

tarily alarmed that Tom was going to say something which would show her own love affair to be in jeopardy. "What has that to do with—with the Count de Montalt?"

"That is precisely what I do not know; what I want to know. I want **you to now ask** M. de Montalt whether he can give you any reason for this."

"Godefroi!" asked Mrs. Markham, turning to him.

"You had better let Mr. Cheriton say all he wishes to say. If I can help him to a better understanding with Miss Merrion, though I am a comparative stranger, I shall of course be delighted—for your sake." He dropped his voice at the last three words, and pointed them with a glance.

"I left London the day after Dessie came here," said Tom Cheriton, "and then I got a letter from Dessie hinting that some kind of trouble was brewing; then another urging me to come back at once; and then a telegram and another letter couched in the same urgent terms. I came, of course, and as you know, Dessie was away; no one knew where or for what. I waited until to-day, and on going to her rooms this afternoon I found that gentleman there—"

"Godefroi!" exclaimed Mrs. Markham, starting.

"There had obviously been a serious conversation between them, and one of the results was that Dessie met me in a condition of some hysterical emotion; said that all was at an end between us; that she could not give me any reason whatever; that she was bound to silence; but that the separation had nothing to do with any change in her feelings toward me. That man is the cause;" and Tom pointed at the Count, who assumed the demeanour of a somewhat amused but quite uncon-

cerned spectator. "There has been no other possible cause for this change in Dessie."

"Were you in Dessie's rooms?" asked Mrs. Markham of the Count, going straight to the one part which seemed to touch her personally, and showing her suspicions in her manner.

"My dear child, if you will think a moment you will see that I could be nowhere else, if I wished to please you," answered the Count. "I knew your anxiety on Miss Merrion's account; I saw you were troubled; and it grieved me. When the telegram came from her I thought I would go and see that all was well with this eccentric young woman journalist. If not, and there was bad news of any kind, I should better know how to break it to you than anyone else in the world. At least, I thought so. I met her at the station, and walked with her to her rooms. That is all," he said, with the air of a man who has explained away a point that need and should have puzzled nobody.

"You need not have gone in," said the widow.

"We had not finished talking, and there was her bag to carry. That is all," he returned, lying blithely and glibly.

"What was the subject of a conversation so engrossing that you could not finish it in the street?" cried Tom.

"Miss Merrion may think me rudely forgetful," said the other man, with a laugh, "if I have to admit that I have forgotten all except the statement that there was nothing the matter and no cause for anyone to be uneasy on her account. She had been away for private reasons, as well as a business engagement. Was there anything else, Miss Merrion?" he asked, looking across at Dessie.

"I am stopping here only to listen. I will not say a

word," said the girl; and then added impetuously, "Tom, this is cruel."

"No, child, it is only necessary," he returned. Then to the Count he said, "Do I understand you to say that Miss Merrion is perfectly at liberty to say anything and everything that passed?"

"At liberty? How can she be otherwise? What right have I to impose restrictions? Your conduct is most extraordinary," and de Montalt drew himself up as in anger.

"Never mind my conduct. I can look after myself, thank you. You are fencing with my question. Do you now, in the presence of all of us, withdraw the prohibition to speak?"

"That question assumes that I have laid some sort of vow of perpetual silence upon her—an altogether ridiculous assumption."

"Yet a correct one," put in Tom sharply.

"Nonsense. Miss Merrion is as much mistress of her own tongue as you are of yours."

"You mean by that, you will not take any of the steps you have threatened if she speaks freely to me?

"I mean that I decline to be a party to prolonging any such ridiculous scene as this. If Miss Merrion wishes to tell you any secret that she may have she must be the judge as to the advisability of doing so. If she will not, well, you must really scold her, not me." His manner galled Cheriton, but before he could reply Mrs. Markham said:

"Dessie, dear, what do you say? What is it all? Is there anything? If so, why don't you speak?" Mrs. Markham was quite appeased by the Count's attitude.

"I have nothing to say," said Dessie. "Nothing, that is, with any hope in it. I have told Tom to-day all that

can be told. I can do no more. I am miserable enough already."

"Well, I must say I think you ought to speak out plainly. There can be no reason whatever for silence that I can see. As to the mistake which Mr. Cheriton appears to have made about Godefroi—I'm sure he hasn't meant anything by it, but it's all nonsense; and as Godefroi says, you can turn your thoughts inside out for all he cares. So if you can explain, I think you ought to." There was more than a sprinkling of vinegar in these references to the Count, and a quite unnecessary sharpness in the manner in which, after a slight pause while she had been waiting for Dessie to speak, she added—"You must know, my dear, that this kind of mysterious secrecy does more harm than anything else, and destroys more friendships than any other cause. It has made me feel quite uncomfortable myself; and I do hope you'll have no more of it."

"This scene must end," said Cheriton, rather abruptly, as he saw that they were gliding towards a quarrel. "I began it, and with but one more word I will finish my part of it. Will you, Mrs. Markham, put the question point blank to that gentleman. Has he or has he not had anything to do with the cause of this change? Can he throw any light upon it?"

"I have already told—" began the Count, when Cheriton interrupted him bluntly.

"I have not asked you to answer me. Will you do this, Mrs. Markham?" He turned questioningly to her.

"I see no object to be gained, Mr. Cheriton. I should only be expressing a doubt of yours which I do not share."

"Can't you see that we are all drifting out to sea, Tom,

the longer this continues?" exclaimed Dessie, anxiously. "I tell you again and again, nothing can be done."

"We are at sea already, I think," he answered, irritated by his complete failure. "But as for doing nothing, that shall be my business. I am sorry to have troubled you, Mrs. Markham, but much more sorry that you have interpreted my conduct as I fear you have."

While he was speaking the servant brought in a telegram for him. He glanced at it and rose at once.

"I should like a word with you before I go, Dessie," he said. "My uncle is not so well, and they have wired for me to go back at once," he said, when they were alone. "Now my last word is this—I won't release you from your promise. You must marry me. I won't rest until I have bottomed this; and then that sneering impudent beggar may look out for himself."

"I am as resolute as you. There is nothing to bottom —except that which must keep us apart for always. Don't harbour a false hope, Tom. There is no hope. Absolutely none." She spoke with a despairing conviction that greatly impressed and disturbed her lover. Dessie saw this, and added with a smile as they shook hands: "You know I'm not easily frightened, Tom. But this is beyond both you and me. If I could only tell you all, you would see it as I see it, and feel that whatever you do you can only add to the misery and wretchedness. But we must get over that and be—friends."

As soon as he had gone the girl went to her room. She thought it probable that the little misunderstanding with Mrs. Markham might have some effect upon their present relations; and it was more than likely that it would be judicious for Dessie to plead pressure of work and go back to her own rooms.

Mrs. Markham was undoubtedly irritated, and the Count de Montalt had been quick to observe it and to turn it to his own advantage. As soon as Dessie and Tom Cheriton had left the room he said:

"This is a very unpleasant incident, Dora. I object strongly to such treatment as this gentleman thinks good enough for me. Had it not been here in your house I should have resented it, and either have turned him out or left myself. It was not for this that I came to England," he continued with an air of offended dignity, "and I must consider what course to take."

"Mr. Cheriton is no favourite of mine," said Mrs. Markham quickly. She was afraid of the effect of de Montalt's anger. "If you wish it, I will never speak to him again."

"You must follow your own wishes, of course. Naturally, I will never exchange another word with him as long as I live. But there is more than that—the whole incident has distressed me. Who is this Miss Merrion that all her fancies and tempers and moods are to be made the cause of insults to me from her friends? I am not used to it. I hope I have some stronger purpose in life than to study the whims of an erratic young woman of this kind."

"She has been my friend—" began Dora, quietly.

"Yes, your friend; and therefore her friends must needs think it necessary to come and browbeat and insult me, and set us two by the ears, and make this mischief. I will not have it." And he got up and walked up and down the room, Mrs. Markham watching him nervously and in silence.

She did not want to have any disagreement with Dessie, but she was more afraid of offending the man she loved; so between the two she was very anxious.

"I'm not wishing to come between you and your friends, Dora," said the man. "That shall never be said of me. I have only one aim in life now—to promote your happiness. I want to increase the number of your friends, not take them away; real friends, I mean; but——" he appeared to hesitate, and then added, as if struck with a sudden thought, "I tell you what I think will be best. Let us put off our marriage. Nay, perhaps better, end the engagement altogether; I——"

"Godefroi!" cried Mrs. Markham, in alarmed protest, getting up to go to him.

"Yes; I mean it. It will be best. You can then satisfy these meddling friends of yours. What does it matter to us? We love each other. We can wait six months, a year, two years, any time—while they are satisfying themselves that I am not an ogre—or at least not such an outrageous scoundrel as your barrister-friend insinuated just now. By heavens, I will not have that thought of me."

"He is no friend of mine," cried the widow, her fears growing. "He is nothing to me—less than nothing. What do I care for his opinion? I will never see him or speak to him again."

"That may be, but there are others. I understand this. I see what it means." He spoke, angrily, and gesticulated impatiently. "I have eyes and wits of my own. I can see the insinuations that these people cast—this Miss Merrion among the rest. They think—but there, I know, and you know what friends of the kind do think. Morbleu! Do you think I can bear that. I, who love you with all my heart; and who would fifty thousand times rather that you were a beggar, like themselves, that I might shew my love. No, Dora; I love you with all my heart and my soul. Had we met years ago

our lives would have been one long path of happiness. But we have met too late." As he said this he stopped intentionally quite close to her and gazed down into her eyes, as if with the pain of infinite regret.

Then she threw herself into his arms and clung to him and embraced and caressed him, herself weeping, and with all the protestations of a deep passion besought him to recall his words and to love her; vowing that no one in the world should ever come between them, and that if he did not marry her she would kill herself.

Everything thus went as he intended, and he exacted two conditions as the terms of peace: That the marriage should take place that day week; and that Dessie should be asked to go home.

Peace had been established some time when the girl entered the room again. The scene with her lover had made Mrs. Markham irritable towards others, and as she had taken her cue from the Count and remembered Dessie's previously stated dislike to him, her manner was not pleasant.

"You've been a long time with Mr. Cheriton, Dessie, considering that, as you say, all is at an end between you."

"Tom went within five minutes of leaving this room," answered the girl, after a glance of momentary astonishment at her friend's tone. "I have been upstairs."

"I hope you have made up your mind to end this mysterious secrecy. It is very unpleasant for everyone."

"I should be only too glad to end it, Dora, if I could. I should not break my heart and spoil my life for the mere fun of the thing," she answered, beginning to resent the widow's manner.

At that moment the Count rose. He scented the coming storm, and had no wish to interfere with it.

"Don't go, Godefroi," said Dora, laying a hand on his arm to detain him, and looking unusually determined. He sat down again to listen. "I want to say something to Dessie while you are here. For some reason or other she has set herself against you, and we have had more than one talk about it. I want her now to know, while we are all together, that I take her prejudice against you as hostile to myself, and as something particularly distasteful. Do you understand me, Dessie?" she asked, turning to her.

"I can scarcely fail to understand what that means, Dora."

"Well, when I tell you that we have determined to be married this day week——"

"So soon!" exclaimed the girl, starting, and looking uneasy.

"Yes, so soon. Have you any objection?" asked Mrs. Markham, with a look of sarcasm. "You are very peculiar, Dessie, very peculiar indeed about my marriage. One would suppose I don't know what—to hear and see you. It is very unfortunate that we have this difference. You and I have always been such good friends that I thought it would be the greatest pleasure in the world for us to be together at such a time; but you act in such a singular way that——"

Dessie looked hard at the Count de Montalt, on whose face, half averted, she seemed to see a smile of mocking triumph under the forced expression of indifference, and then a sharp glance at her friend showed her that the latter was flushed with irritation, but so far nervous as to suggest that she was really putting some compulsion on herself to take a step she did not like.

"I understand you now, Dora, at any rate," said the girl. "You are being hurried, whether you know it or

not, into this marriage, and part of the arrangement is that you and I should be separated. I will go, my dear, without any further words."

She rose and walked to the door, and then turned and said, "Before I go I shall see you, but let it be alone." And then she went out, leaving both her hearers with the impression that she had had the best of the encounter.

It was hard that at such a moment this additional blow should have been struck, and Dessie felt this; but she would not give the feeling rein, and her chief thought as she went away to get ready to leave was one of dismay that the marriage was to take place so soon, and that she could not stop it.

CHAPTER XVIII

CLOSING IN

It was with a very brave but sad heart that Dessie Merrion faced the new development in her affairs. Very little was said either by her or Mrs. Markham before she left Edgcumbe Square, although both felt the estrangement keenly. Mrs. Markham, on her side, would not press Dessie to stay, for fear of giving offence to the Count de Montalt; while the girl, on her side, was too hurt to say a word.

She passed the evening giving those little touches of arrangement to her rooms which her taste suggested—the little simple changes which gave the place such an air of homeliness and comfort.

Afterwards, she went through the papers in the safe, to ascertain which had been stolen by the Count; and she soon ascertained that he had gained all his knowledge from the little diary in which she had been in the habit of jotting down notes of important events, sometimes in shorthand, and sometimes in a kind of cypher; just a date, or a line of reference, and only very rarely with any fulness. It was this book which had betrayed her; and the loss of it set her dreaming and thinking of the curious facts in her life—which it chronicled so briefly.

Gradually her thoughts settled, and the great care which had come swooping down on her life, like a huge dark cloud, absorbed them.

It was inevitable that she should have grave doubts

about the prudence of the course she had taken, as well as of the right of it. At the bottom of all her thoughts was the passionate protest against losing the man she loved, and it filled her with dismay to think of what life would be without him.

"How shall I be able to go on living day after day, week after week, without the thought that the day is some time to dawn which will see us man and wife? It was the salt of my life: The one thing that kept all else fresh and sweet and pleasant, and made life worth living. But now"—she sighed, deeply and heavily.

"I wonder if I ought to have told him. If I ought to have dared that devil to do his worst. But there—how could I marry him? How could I bear to pass my life waiting for the blow to fall that would let the world know that his wife was the sister of a murderess? How hard this world is! The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, indeed! And yet, what have I ever done to deserve this? Been born the daughter of—of such a father. Happy the woman who has no need to think with shame of a father's life!"

Then came another pause in the thread.

"I wish I was twenty years older. If I was only forty-five—I wonder what I shall be at forty, or if I shall live so long, and what my life will be like. I suppose there will come a time when I shall be able to think about my work again. To take the drab-coloured warp of reality and weave in the fancy-coloured threads of my little puppets' lives. Well, I shall now be able to write realistically enough about sorrow and trouble, and heart-sickening disappointment! And I shall have to go on doing that till I die. A lonely figure, probably shabby, seared with the lines of trouble on my face, but always alone, because carrying a burden of secrecy that not a soul may

share. I suppose if I go out to-morrow and use my eyes in the streets I shall see fifty little old women, any one of whom will stand to me for a type of what I shall be in the future. I, who have done nothing; while that man whose life has been saturated with evil deeds— But I'm a fool to talk like this; I must do something," and jumping up she found some work, and forced herself to do it.

But the evening was a most lonesome and wretched one, and despite her most resolute efforts her thoughts would go back to her lover. Everything in the place seemed to remind her of him.

In the morning she was less low-spirited. The second post brought her a letter from Tom Cheriton, which gave her heart, though it nearly brought tears to her eyes.

"D. D.—Same as ever you see, and refuse ever to be different. The uncle very bad, and very glad to see me to-night. I told him all about you; and you'll have to come down here. I painted you in such colours that I think he's in love with you himself. You'll have a surprise to-morrow, I expect. I'm not going to be idle, I can tell you. So look out. T."

"P.S.—Keep a bag packed to come down here in case of emergency. But you'll hear all about it."

Dessie read the letter over and over again, and tried to pretend that it did not make her hopeful. But it did for a long time; until she ran over in thought again all the terrible consequences to her sister and herself which must follow if she dared to set the Count de Montalt at defiance.

There was no escape. All the hopefulness and resolution in the world could not battle against the one grim fact that the man could send her sister to the dock and

probably to the gallows, if they dared to interfere with him.

Thus the hope which her lover's little letter kindled was extinguished, but the perplexity at some of the references remained. "You'll have a surprise to-morrow!" What surprise? What could he be going to do? Something kindly meant, of course, but what could it be? And the more frequently she read the letter the less could she understand it.

She tried to start writing a little story, but her thoughts would only run in one groove, and she sat biting the end of the pen and guessing what Tom meant by the "surprise."

She idled unwillingly but irresistibly in this way for an hour or two, until work being out of the question she resolved to go for a walk. As she went out she gave instructions, clear and explicit enough now that under no circumstances was anyone ever to be admitted to her rooms in her absence.

"Not that it would have mattered much," she thought. "If that man meant to get into the rooms and rummage them he would have done it whatever precautions Mrs. Tonkin might have taken. He would have broken in if necessary." Her walk cheered and braced her a bit, and after a light dinner, which she took at a small club of which she was a member, she returned home determined to go to work.

The Count de Montalt had called during her absence she was told, and had left a message that he wished to see her on urgent business that afternoon early.

She had indeed partly anticipated that he would pay her a visit. She had done nothing toward carrying out the second part of the bargain with the Count—the restoration of the jewels. Probably he had called for them.

He arrived almost before she had had time to take off her hat, and his manner now was considerably changed towards her. It was no longer effusively polite, but inclined rather to bully and threaten.

"I was surprised not to see you this morning," he said, somewhat brusquely. "You must have expected me, and you know, of course, the object of my visit."

"What is it?"

"I have come for the jewels of mine which you have in your possession."

"They are not here," said Dessie, quite as abruptly. "I forgot to get them, and they are not here."

"You can get them. The Deposit Company's Safe Depót is close here. I am not to be trifled with. I thought you knew that."

"I am not trifling with you; but I will not do anything in a hurry," she answered. "You know, too well, that to use your means of forcing me must result only in spoiling your own plans. I am not Dora," said Dessie, looking at him resolutely.

"No, not Dora; Dorothy," he answered significantly—"Dorothy Marlow."

"I understand your implied threat, but it is mere empty air in this case," retorted Dessie. "I shall do what I said—but I shall do it in my own way. You seem to think that all are like yourself—never to be trusted to do a thing unless the whip is always lifted."

"The whip I lift has blood knots in the lash," he answered, angrily, "and I do not suppose you are likely to act out of sheer affection."

He ended with a sneering laugh.

Dessie made no reply to this; and after a pause he continued, in quite a changed tone—one of half banter, half seriousness.

"I suppose if I were to tell you that I am really sorry to have had to put this trouble on you you would not believe me. Yet it's true, and——"

"I have no intention of permitting you to address a single word more than this business renders absolutely necessary," interposed Dessie, with angry curtness.

"Yet it is true—absolutely true," he continued, not noticing her interruption, "and nothing would please me better than to hit on some way of avoiding the trouble altogether."

"You can do that easily by giving up this mean and infamous plan of marrying my friend for her money," rapped out the girl.

"Should I break her heart and my own merely because she chances to be rich?" he asked, in reply, showing his white teeth in a smile, and throwing up his hands in mock dismay. "I mean some practical way, of course —something in reason."

"This interview is exceedingly distasteful to me," said Dessie. "If you have any further object to gain, be good enough to state it at once."

"There is the pleasure of being in your society, Miss —Merrion," was the answer, with a slight pause before the name.

"If that is all, my pleasure will be secured by your leaving me. A wild beast may play too long with its victim, remember, and the latter may escape. It is not by any means too late for me to recall the word I gave—"

"You pride yourself on keeping your word," he put in, quickly, with a sneer.

"You are reducing me to a condition in which I have no pride left for anything," was her retort. "But do not mistake me. I am taking my course as the result of calculation, and it is no part of that calculation to be

pestered with your presence. You will perhaps be tempted to keep away from me for the future, when I tell you that every time I see you I am shaken with doubt whether I dare comply with your terms, and sacrifice my friend even to save my sister. Your presence revives every instinct of dread of you, till I am wild with a desire to rush and tell Dora the truth. Don't come here again, or the temptation to dare all for the truth's sake will be more than I can resist," she cried, angrily, as she rose from her chair.

The Count rose also.

"You hold your life cheap," he said, with a glance of anger. "If you want to be rid of it, do what you say. And now, what about the jewels? When will you give them up, and how?"

"I will have them here on Monday, in the afternoon, if I have not changed my mind in the meantime and taken courage to tell the truth."

He went without a reply, and Dessie, shaken in her resolve by her own words, sat down again in great agitation.

The thought of Dora in the power of this remorseless and utterly reckless scoundrel was indescribably distressing, and the sense of absolute powerlessness which her present isolation intensified, made her misery almost unendurable.

The Count de Montalt's visit and the whirlpool of thoughts which followed it rendered work impossible for the rest of that day, and in the night she was troubled and restless. It increased her perplexity, too, that nothing followed the hint which Tom Cheriton had dropped in his letter. Moreover, on the following morning, there was no letter from him; and Dessie felt really ill owing to the suspense, and lack of sleep and despondency.

Early in the forenoon she had a visitor—Sir E. Landale, and as she connected him now with de Montalt, the visit angered her.

"You are looking very ill," he said, as soon as he saw her.

"Your visit will not make me well," she retorted, sharply. "Had I known you were coming here, I would not have had you admitted. If you wish to save yourself the indignity of being shown out by the housekeeper, you will not stay here."

"I mean well by you; I declare I do. I will do anything to help you in this trouble. I know the cause of it——"

"What do you mean?" cried the girl, who was so anxious that she was interested in spite of herself. "What more do you know than I told you when you—well, you know what I mean?" she finished, with a curl of the lip that showed her contempt.

"Whatever I know I can keep to myself," answered the baronet, cautiously, noticing her fresh anxiety. "I have come to tell you again that I love you. You are alone, absolutely alone in all this. For the second time in your life you have had to make a big break up of your life——"

"Ah, you have seen de Montalt again," said Dessie, seeing the evidence of this in his words. He winced a little.

"If I have, what then? I have no thought but your good—if you will do what I want. Marry me, Dessie, and make an end of the whole trouble. You can never marry Cheriton. You know that you can't go on living here—doing more than a man's work for a girl's pay that barely keeps you alive. You may think you can do it for a time; but how are you going to keep it up? You're

looking now as ill as a dog. Give it up. You've made a plucky fight of it, and it isn't your fault you're beaten. But you are beaten. You can't help it. Give yourself to me. I know I acted like a brute years ago; but on my soul I want nothing better than a chance of showing you I'm sorry."

He paused a moment in the hope that her silence, which was unbroken by any sign of protest on her part, might promise him well.

Dessie had waited while he spoke, not looking at him, but with her head bent down. She raised it now to look at him.

"Go on," she said calmly. "You've not finished. Let me hear all you have to say."

"It's all summed up in one sentence," he said. "I want you to marry me. If you will but say yes, you can step in a moment from the lonely life of this place, with all its hard, grinding, hopeless work, into a life that I swear shall have enough of brightness and prosperity and wealth in it to distract even your thoughts from the fact that I was once so miserably unworthy of you. Will you marry me?"

"Have you anything else to say?" she asked, in a hard, curt tone.

"Only the one plea—I love you now as I thought I never could love."

"Then here is my answer. I would not marry you, if the choice lay between your wealth and the workhouse. I have no more to say;" and she opened the door and held it for the Baronet to go out.

"I will try to make you, yet—and I have the power now."

"Yes, that is your love; I knew it," she said, with a

mocking laugh; and she met his eyes steadily as he went out of the room like a whipped dog.

But no sooner had the door closed on him than the fear rose to her thoughts that, if de Montalt and this man were really in league, a marriage with him might be made part of the terms. And the thought sickened and frightened her, adding even to her previous misery.

"I cannot do it. I would rather die, ten thousand times rather," she said to herself; and in this mood she sat, strengthening herself in this resolve, and infinitely sad, as she seemed to find every avenue of hope closing against her, while one after another the courses she would have chosen were becoming impossible.

She could not confide in her lover; she was driven to sacrifice her friend; a marriage with a man she despised seemed likely to be forced upon her; and on every hand she saw the objects she desired kept from her, and those she loathed forced upon her.

Yet, which ever way she turned the knowledge that a word from de Montalt could send her sister to the dock was more than enough to completely unnerve and frighten her.

She was in this mood of deepest dejection when she was disturbed by someone knocking at the door.

She went and opened it, and then stood for a moment staring in blank surprise at her visitor.

She knew her in a moment, though they had met only once before, and then for only a few minutes.

It was the woman who had been with Rolande Lespard when the latter was arrested. Dessie was so surprised that her lips could not frame the question that rose to them, as to the possible reason for the visit. But her visitor seemed to guess the question, and taking the

girl's hands in hers, she pressed them, and then kissed her pale face and whispered:

"You are surprised, of course. But I come from Mr. Cheriton—your Tom."

CHAPTER XIX

DESSIE'S VISITOR

DESSIE'S surprise when she recognised her visitor was so intense that she could not overcome it. When they had both sat down she kept looking at the newcomer, while a rush of confused thoughts perplexed and bewildered her.

What did the visit mean? Was the woman really from Tom? Was there some fresh treachery underneath it? Was it some new trick of the Count's to catch her in a further complication. One after another questions of this kind crossed her thoughts, as she recalled how egregiously deceived she had been lately in all directions.

She had quickly come to associate the unexpected with danger; and at first her suspicions predominated over all feelings except surprise, and she sat scanning the elder woman sharply and cautiously.

Her scrutiny reassured her somewhat; but her recent experiences made her unwilling to place too much confidence in any stranger.

"It is five years since we met?" she said suspiciously, breaking the long silence, and implying a question in the tone of her voice.

"I have not forgotten the day; I never shall forget it. If you have got over your surprise and your suspicions of me—I do not blame you for them, but you need not harbour them—I will tell you everything that brings me here to-day."

Dessie said nothing; but hungry impatience lighted her eyes, as she fixed them on her companion's face.

"I have had a journey," said the latter, pleasantly, and speaking in a composed, reassuring, friendly manner. "May I take off my wraps?" She threw aside her cape, and Dessie's quick eyes noted in an instant that everything she wore was very good and very fashionable.

When she sat down again it was close to Dessie; so close that she could take the girl's hand.

"Will you kiss me, Dessie?" she asked, looking right into her eyes. "And try and trust me as much as Tom himself does?" Dessie kissed her readily, partly moved by the mention of that name, and partly yielding to the interested regard she had felt when they had last met.

"Now, let me tell you everything. Tom has sent me up to win your confidence, and I'm going to begin by giving you mine—telling you what has never passed my lips before. You'll know what I mean." She paused an instant, and then resumed. "Tom's uncle is, as you know, Robert Davenant; and I am the wife of John Davenant, his brother. I am Constance Davenant."

"You, Mrs. Davenant, his uncle John's wife? Why he told me—" Dessie stopped as if in confusion. But her companion smiled.

"You may finish. I am the wife John Davenant first ill-treated and then left; and it was before he left me, years ago, that you and I met that day at Birmingham."

The composure with which she referred to this surprised Dessie, who let the feeling show in her looks.

"I expect Tom Cheriton has told you very much, but nothing that he can have told you can equal the truth. It is twelve years since I married John Davenant, and after the first twelve months he never had a word for me that

was not half a curse, nor an action that he would not have liked to be a blow. I bore it for my child's sake until—the mad time that climaxed that day at Birmingham Station." In the pause, Dessie took the elder woman's hand in hers and held it. Then she whispered:

"You need not tell me any more if it pains you. You come from Tom. That is enough for me—enough to make me trust you."

"I am going to tell you, all the same. We had been abroad, my husband and I, making one of those dismal pilgrimages that people call pleasure tours; and on our return through London two things happened. My husband forced on my acquaintance a woman I knew to be his mistress, and we met the man whom you saw me with at Birmingham, Rolande Lespard. But he called himself to us Jules Caspien. You know the man—his shrewdness, daring, cleverness—and you can understand how in five minutes he would detect the skeleton in our lives, how he would ingratiate himself with my husband, and—but it is enough. He did all this and was asked to stay at our house in the Midlands."

She paused again.

"But what you cannot understand is how the man appeared to me in contrast from my brutal husband, who chose that time of all others to heap every indignity upon me in order, as I believe, to drive me from the house. He threw this man in my way, and I—well, I forgot all in the lying hope of happiness which the man held out to me. I was flying with him that day—we had left home only some three hours before you and I met—and the full scheme would have been carried out but for the arrest of the man and the warning which, by the mercy of God, you gave me. Now you can see what

you saved me from, Dessie, and why I did not dare to make myself known to you, and why I have always thought of you as a dear sister."

She stopped to kiss the girl.

"I went back, and then I saw that the whole scheme had been planned by my husband and that villain, and my eyes were open indeed to the infamy of both. My return completely disconcerted him; but I had not been away long enough for him to bring any charge against me, while the arrest of the man Le Caspien, or Lespard, made it impossible for the conspiracy to be carried further. I had been pulled up on the very brink of destruction, and was saved to protect my child and to wonder how I could ever have been so mad and blind as to have been forced by my husband's brutality and cunning into forgetting her even for an instant. Two years later my husband left me and went abroad, having ruined himself in health and pocket by his excesses. He has never returned; but his brother, who has always taken my side, insists that a share of his wealth is mine and my child's by right."

"How you must have suffered," said Dessie, gently, as she pressed the hand she held.

"It is over, thank God," was the reply. "But now you know the secret of that meeting, which no one else on earth knows but you. Do you know I often have the picture of you in my thoughts, as you were that day. You were not so pale as you are to-day—not half so careworn and hopeless looking, and the moment my eyes met yours I seemed to realise partly what a fearful blunder I was making. You looked so strong, self-reliant, quick and resolute, and yet so incapable of wrong-doing or thinking, that the mere silent contact with you stirred the good in me and scared the evil. But at first I felt it was

too late, and then when you came back with your quick, impulsive warning, urging me to fly at once, I seemed to see right and honour opening before me again at your bidding, and I fled almost without a word to you—and yet you were more like an angel to me in that moment than all the religion of all my life had ever let me conceive. It was you who saved me, Dessie, and I have come now to save you in return. For you are shivering on the brink of an error which may have as terrible consequences for you as mine might have had for me, and, of all strange coincidences in the world, through the same evil man, for I have learnt enough from Tom to know that it is the same man."

Dessie trembled a little, and then said, slowly and sadly.

"Yes, it is the same man."

"The coincidence, of course, is all due to those jewels which the man says he put in my bag. I suppose they have given him his hold over you. Were they there?"

"Yes. I found them, of course," said Dessie. "And I——"

"Stay a moment before you tell me anything. Let me finish what I know about them. It is very little. I found out afterwards, of course, who the man Le Caspien was, and followed his trial as Rolande Lespard for the murder of an old man. Did you see that?" Dessie nodded.

"Well, some three years afterwards, just when I wrote to you, he came to me. What he thought to do I cannot tell, but his power over me was broken. I threatened to have him turned out of the house if he ever came near me again, and I would have done it. But it was the jewels he wanted, not me; although when he told me the tale about them I did not believe him. I did

not remember he had ever given me the cigar case to take care of; but I have no doubt that he did so in order that if anything happened to him they should be found on me instead of on him. I suppose he went in actual fear of the arrest, but I have even now no idea how he came by the jewels. I suppose he had stolen them. He is certainly villain enough."

"He is villain enough for anything," said Dessie.

"I wrote to you to put you on your guard should you ever meet him, and in case the story he told should be true. But I little thought there would ever be need. Now I think you know everything, except that when I heard from Tom one day that he wanted to marry a girl named Dessie Merrion, I puzzled my brains to think whether it could be you. I could not let drop a word about my knowing you; neither could I do what Tom was always asking me to do—come up and see you. I think—" and she stopped, and taking both Dessie's hands in hers, held them, and smiled to her, "I think I was a little afraid of you—afraid of what might happen if you recognised me, as of course you would. And do you know that is about the only thing I ever refused Tom Cheriton in all my life. I never can resist that cheery winning, breezy way of his—his wheedling way; and I have had to tell terrible stories and invent all sorts of excuses and plans to get out of doing what would have given me the sweetest pleasure in life—having you down to stay with me—if only I could have made sure what you would be to me."

There was no doubt now as to what Dessie thought of her; the girl's heart was warming with every reference to Tom.

"But I could help you in one way all the same, Robert—his uncle Robert, you know, who is one of the

kindest and best-hearted men that ever lived—would take the crotchet into his head that you were a fortune-hunter, and wished to marry Tom, not because you loved him, but because you wanted a share in the money which Tom will one day have; and he accordingly insisted that Tom must show himself able to earn at least £200 a year in his profession. But the whole thing was merely intended to test your love for him; and day after day I used to talk to him, filling him up with implied praises of you. But he always had the best of it."

"How?" asked Dessie, with a bright smile—her thoughts were all away from her troubles for the moment, and all with her lover.

"Ah, that's the smile Tom raves about," said Mrs. Davenant, smiling in her turn. "And I'm not surprised either, my dear. Let Robert feel the warmth of one of those looks, and his opposition will melt as surely as the sun melts snow. But he could always beat me, as I said, because he would turn on me and say, 'If you think so much of the girl, why don't you have her to stay with you?' and I had no answer. I came to town once, resolved to see you, but my courage failed me, and I went back, having only met you in the street, after waiting about outside here for some hours. I thought that a girl who could fight the plucky fight you had fought, and be so strong as to win your way to independence alone and friendless in this big, cold, hard Babylon might be so confident of her own strength as to despise the weakness which I showed in the moment which threw us together."

"And now?" asked Dessie, with another smile, a mingling of happiness and love.

"Now I think I am the harder of the two. Then came the news of all this trouble—that you had fallen myste-

riously into the power of a Count de Montalt, an unknown Frenchman, whose description by Tom made me recognise him at once. I felt that my hour for strength had indeed come. I was to have a glorious revenge on you, Dessie"—kissing her. "You had saved me and might think harshly of my weakness, but I could at any rate save you, and we could both be strong together. If two such women as you and I are not a match for even that villain Lespard—well, we'll call in a certain English barrister that I know to help us."

She finished with a laugh that was sweet music in Dessie's ears; but the girl's fears and grief were too fresh and too heavy not to reassert themselves soon.

"I am very glad you have come; I felt like starving for a little friendship; but even you cannot guess how infinite the trouble is."

"Guess it? No, not all of it. I can certainly guess some of it though, and you must tell me the rest."

Dessie shook her head slowly and smiled.

"I cannot. I could not tell Tom." This was an unanswerable reason for telling no one else. Mrs. Davenant understood this, but she had come prepared to combat the determination. She made no reply for a few moments, and then in a very earnest and affectionate tone she said:

"My dear, you must not let any previous resolution prevent your speaking plainly to me. I have spoken to Tom on——"

"Have you told him about the—about our Birmingham meeting?" asked the girl, interrupting eagerly.

"No, not yet. I wished first to make quite sure that this impostor Count was in fact that same scoundrel. But I shall tell him now, of course, and, if necessary, shall tell him also the part that the villain played in my

life." She paused for Dessie to speak. But the latter made no response.

"Won't you tell me everything, and trust me?" asked Mrs. Davenant.

"It would do no good—and I cannot. The jewels are only the least part of the whole trouble."

"Then I shall go to this de Montalt himself; and more than that, I shall see Mrs. Markham and let her know what I know of him."

"If you do you will ruin me," cried Dessie, passionately. "He will think I have instigated you, and he will——"

"Will what?" asked Mrs. Davenant, when Dessie paused.

"It will ruin me. Don't go to him; don't please, Mrs. Davenant," she cried again, in a tone of great distress, taking her companion's hand and kissing it. "If I could tell you—and would to God I could—you and Tom would both see that only trouble and misery and ruin can come of this interference. Don't see him, and don't speak a word to Dora—Mrs. Markham. Go back and leave me to bear this load alone. I can bear it; indeed, I must. But I cannot bear what will follow from your interference. I know you mean to do what is kind and loving, and I know that Tom hasn't a thought that isn't loving and sincere. But this is stronger than us all. It is, indeed. It is hopeless; and only misery can come of any efforts to help me. Please, please believe I know what I am saying. Nothing can help me but silence. Nothing on earth." She was almost hysterical in her agitation.

"You must let me be the judge of that, Dessie. I can only promise to do nothing if you tell me everything, and I see for myself that you are right."

"I cannot tell you; I cannot; I must not. If I were to say even a word to you, I should only be bringing down the ruin that I dread more than death. Mrs. Davenant, I give you my word that there is a bar between Tom and me which must always keep us apart—always. If I told it to you and to him, you would both see it as plainly as I do—and I am pledged not to speak—pledged under the penalty that is absolute and utter ruin."

Dessie's profound distress pained and embarrassed her companion.

"What is this barrier?"

"I cannot tell you. Please ask me no more."

"Dessie, my dear, I cannot leave it like this. Tom loves you like the true honourable fellow he is, and his happiness is bound up in this hope of making you his wife."

"I can never marry him. I am not fit."

"He told me you had said this, and that it is the only thing you ever told him that he does not believe; and I agree with him. I cannot, therefore, let things rest where they are. I believe, and so does he, that you are acting in this way for some cause which has quite upset your balance of judgment—and I must interfere to save you from yourself."

Dessie sighed, and withdrawing her hands from her companion's clasp, let them fall on her lap, with a movement of despair.

"As you will," she said, in a low tone of sorrow; "as you will. But some day, when you know all and when the ruin has come, you will be sorry indeed that you have been so merciless in your friendship."

"No; on the contrary," said Mrs. Davenant, firmly, as she got up. "I shall save you from a ruin which, I am sure, you have done nothing to deserve."

Dessie made no answer, and watched Mrs. Davenant put on her bonnet.

"Are you going? Where?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"I am going straight to Mrs. Markham, and to face this villain who calles himself de Montalt—to unmask him." And kissing Dessie lovingly, she whispered: "Keep heart and hope, for Tom's sake."

The next moment the door closed behind her, and Dessie felt chilled with the knowledge that the ruin she dreaded was now brought close at hand.

CHAPTER XX

DAPHNE AGAIN

Mrs. Davenant was much disturbed and profoundly perplexed by the interview with Dessie, and on her way to South Kensington to see Mrs. Markham, she turned over and over in her thoughts all that the girl had said, trying vainly to guess the key to the mystery which had caused the sudden rupture between the two lovers.

She had long accustomed herself to think of Dessie in a strain of somewhat exaggerated admiration. The service which the girl had rendered her at the critical moment of her life, had developed and grown as the result of constant thankful remembrance until Dessie had become in a manner idealised in her thoughts. All that Tom Cheriton ever said had seemed to confirm and strengthen her feelings until they were almost passionate.

As a consequence, it was impossible for her to interpret the secret as involving anything disgraceful to Dessie herself. But at the same time the knowledge that there was some secret which as Dessie herself declared might mean ruin, that it was in some way connected with the man de Montalt, and that it was something more serious than the possession of the jewels, formed a problem which baffled her.

She was convinced, however, that the key was in the holding of the man who called himself the Count de Montalt, and she meant to have a hard struggle to get it.

When she reached Mrs. Markham's house in Edg-

cumbe Square, the widow was not at home, so that she could do no more than leave her name and say that she would call again. When she called the second time, she was shown in at once, but instead of Mrs. Markham, the Count de Montalt came to her.

"I want to see Mrs. Markham, not you," she said, curtly.

"Fortune is on my side in this case," he answered calmly. "When I saw your card, I recognised it as a storm signal, thanked you mentally for your warning, and made my preparations to receive you. I come to you now laden with regrets from Mrs. Markham—to whom I have given a brief sketch of your career and your probable business with her—because she finds herself unable to see you. She has fatigued herself very much to-day, and knowing that you and I are old acquaintances, begs that you will allow me to be her messenger in this matter. If you like it more plainly—I do not intend you to see Mrs. Markham." The change in his manner which marked his utterance of the last sentence was sharp enough.

"My object here is to ask Mrs. Markham whether she knows a certain Rolande Lespard."

"I can answer that for her. She does not. She has not many French friends as yet—she may extend the list after marriage with me. Of course your informant, Miss Merrion—shall we say Merrion?—has told you that Mrs. Markham is going to do me the inestimable honour of becoming my wife." The pause before Dessie's name did not escape Mrs. Davenant.

"Miss Merrion has told me nothing—will tell me nothing; and it is because of that I am here."

"Miss Merrion is discretion itself," he replied, as if enthusiastically. "A young lady whose confidence it

is an honour to share and a crime to disclose. I have a keen interest in Miss Merrion, and I am glad she did not send you here." His ineffable assurance exasperated Mrs. Davenant.

"I come at the request of Mr. Cheriton, who is a relative of mine—my nephew."

"Your dear husband's nephew?" he interposed with a sneer.

"Yes, my husband's nephew. He told me enough about you to enable me to recognise you; and because of thatI am here."

"For what purpose?"

"To warn Mrs. Markham what manner of man you are."

"That is profoundly kind of you. But I fear you will not have to take that trouble. I do not propose that my future wife should make the acquaintance of a lady who was once all but—my mistress." He paused to give this emphasis.

"You scoundrel," cried Mrs. Davenant, her cheeks flaming. "You dare to say that!"

"I am a martyr to the truth, when it suits my purpose. But does your nephew know of that interesting little episode in your career? If so, I am surprised he should think any acquaintance between you and my wife possible. I know young men have loose notions nowadays, but really I thought better of Cheriton. I suppose he thinks his own respectability makes the difference."

The sneering insolence of his taunts was indescribably offensive, but Mrs. Davenant put a strong curb on her anger. She knew that he spoke with an object, that insolence with him was as easy as courtesy, and that his

mood was intended only as a means to secure some end he had in view.

"You shall answer for these sneers," she said sharply; "but they will not help you to deceive me now. I understand you too well to be either irritated or pleased by any mood you choose to assume. You can tell as well as I what my present object is."

"I hope you don't want to renew the old relations. Even if your husband is dead, I cannot marry you."

"You are an infamous coward," cried Mrs. Davenant, hotly, whom the fresh insult stung like a whip lash. "But there, I will not let anything you say anger me," she added in a calmer tone.

"You are still charming in your tempests," he said again, smiling. "Only in the old days your husband was the cause and object of them, not—your lovers."

"You will not irritate me again," replied Mrs. Davenant. "I have a purpose to gain, and I am here to gain it. You have come between my nephew, Mr. Cheriton, and Miss Merrion. You have bound her by some means to keep silent, and have so frightened her, that she scarcely knows what she is doing. She is almost beside herself with terror of you. What is the cause? Will you tell me—or shall I force it from you?"

"It is very charming of you to attribute to me so much influence over Miss Merrion," he answered, with his mocking smile. "But really I don't possess it. As for keeping those two faithful, loving, devoted hearts apart, I am not so cruel. So far as I am concerned, they may marry to-morrow; and as I understand that the young lady has no parents, I shall be only too happy to give her away to Mr. Cheriton."

"You have separated her from her friend here."

"On the contrary, she separated herself. But I am bound to add I should have done so. I do not consider her a fit companion for my wife."

"That is rather a compliment. You class her with me."

"Not exactly with you," he answered, steadily. "You are only a woman who would—she is one who did."

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Davenant, hot with anger again. "Do you dare——"

"Ask Sir Edmund Landale," he interposed, curtly. "You will then know why I class her where I do."

"Do you insinuate——"

"I insinuate nothing. I only tell you that Sir Edmund Landale is the man whom this Miss Dessie Merrion, as she calls herself, did not marry. Ask him the rest—or her? Why do you suppose she makes all this mystery, if there is no disgraceful secret? As for marrying your Mr. Cheriton, if he cares to marry her—when he knows what there is to know—it is nothing to me."

It was a dastardly blow, but it struck home, and Mrs. Davenant sat silent and dismayed. She was all unwillingness to believe any harm of Dessie, and her whole instincts revolted against the idea of accepting for a moment any slander he might utter. But the sheer audacity of the accusation impressed her in spite of herself, and the reference to the fact of the mystery impressed her in spite of her faith.

"I do not believe a word you say. Not a word," she said, after the pause. "You have some diabolical motive, and for this reason you make this abominable charge."

"As you please. It is nothing to me," he returned, lightly, with a shrug of the shoulders and a gesture of indifference. "You can easily prove it."

"Who is this Sir Edmund Landale?"

"Ask Miss—Merrion. She can tell you—if she likes"—this with a sneer. "Ask her, or go and see him. Any directory will give you his address. I will go with you if you wish. You quite mistake me. I am interested in this poor girl's——"

"Bah! I know the interest you would take in such a case. Your own."

He raised his hands and eyebrows to express his protest.

"Is there anything more you wish to say or do? If not"—he left the sentence unfinished, but his meaning was clear enough.

"Before I leave this house, I mean to see Mrs. Markham."

"You will do no good—to your young friend."

"Nor to you," she retorted, sharply. "But I mean what I say."

"Then I'll go and fetch her." He bowed gravely and went to the door and before he opened it turned and said: "If I succeed in inducing Mrs. Markham to see you for once do not blame me if you find yourself treated with very scant courtesy."

And with that he bowed again to her, a smile twitching the corners of his mouth as he left the room.

As Mrs. Davenant waited, a crowd of perplexing thoughts pressed upon her and after sitting some time, she began to grow impatient. This feeling developed quickly as the minutes passed. A quarter of an hour went, and when this had lengthened into nearly half an hour, she rang the bell.

"Does Mrs. Markham know that I am waiting to see her on very important business? Please to tell her," she said to the servant.

"Mrs. Markham, mum? answered the man, in some astonishment. "She's gone out, mum, with the Count—nearly half an hour ago."

"Gone out?" cried Mrs. Davenant, in astonishment. "Why, I have been waiting here to see her."

"They must have made some mistake, I think, mum, and thought you had gone. The Count gave me a letter to give to you—Mrs. Davenant, I think?—if you should call again."

"Bring it to me, please. There must have been some mistake."

The man went away and returned with a letter. Mrs. Davenant opened it hurriedly.

"DEAR CONSTANCE,

Inadvertently you see I have dropped into the old style. I have tried to persuade my Dora to see you, but she will not. I am sorry to have to leave you in the house, but my dear Dora's health is not strong enough to warrant her facing such a scene as one between an old love of one kind and a new one of another. We had already planned a little trip into the country, and time is too short to allow of my seeing you personally to tell you this.

G. de M."

As she read this she nearly bit her lip through with vexation at the manner in which the man had outwitted her; and telling the servant she would call again, she left the house.

She understood the meaning of the trick well enough. He was determined that she should not see Mrs. Markham before the wedding if possible, and had hurried her away from London.

She went next to Tom Cheriton's chambers, where any

message from him was to be sent to her; and she found there a telegram recalling her home in hot haste, as Mr. Davenant had had a serious relapse, and was in danger. She wrote a few hurried lines to Dessie, just a message of hope and comfort, and a word to explain her departure, and drove to the station.

Meanwhile, Dessie herself had been coming to a new resolution as to her own plans.

Mrs. Davenant's visit had troubled her greatly. It was clear to the girl that even those who were nearest and dearest to her did not mean to let her go her own way in peace, and that despite all she might do and say, they would interfere and hurry on the ruin and exposure which she was striving might and main to avoid.

All the best intentions in the world and the most affectionate motives and desires could not alter the facts of the case. She and Tom were parted beyond the possibility of reunion, and any interposition by him or by Mrs. Davenant could do no good, and must do harm. She came to the conclusion that she must therefore manage to convince them both of the uselessness of any action in her behalf; and there was only one way in which she could do this.

Flight.

She had had to cut herself absolutely adrift from her former life, and she must do it again. The comparative success of her first attempt made her ready to attempt it again, and she soon had a plan formed.

She would give up the jewels to the man, de Montalt, and then quietly disappear from London, take another name, and begin again in some other big town. She was much better qualified to make a good fight of it now than she had been before, and though she would have to begin all over again in her literary work in a fresh name, she

had her experience to guide her and confidence in her ability to make the new start successfully.

She had just formed her resolve when a telegram from the Count came, saying that he should call the next day instead of Monday. This suited her plans, and she went at once to the Safe Company to get the jewels.

There a surprise awaited her. There was a letter from Daphne, in which the latter said that she was coming to London, and that Dessie must let her know at once where they could meet. After a moment's reflection, she wired in the name Merrion and gave the address of her own rooms.

This letter gave yet a new direction to her thoughts, and after she had been to the safe and taken out the rubies, she walked slowly home to her rooms, deep in thought as to the possibility of carrying out a plan that occurred to her.

It might be practicable, she thought, to go out of the country with Daphne; right away to some distant colony, where the old pains and old pleasures might both be forgotten, and a quite fresh life commenced, where neither they themselves nor their ugly history would be known.

The idea pleased her; pain though it was to think of putting the sea between Tom and herself. Yet it would be better for him. He would then be forced to realise the uselessness of any further hope, and cease to be troubled about her.

When she had passed some time in this kind of dreaming, Mrs. Davenant's letter came; and it seemed as though all things were combining to make the plan of flight easy. Tom was away; Mrs. Davenant was now called away again; Mrs. Markham had quarrelled with her; Daphne was coming up to town. One last short

interview was all that was necessary to finish all relations with the Count. Everything was shaping itself to the one end.

Presently she commenced to pack her things. To-morrow must see her away somewhere. When Tom or Mrs. Davenant came next to town she must be away, and nothing should remain by which she could be traced. A letter to each of them would be enough. It might seem hard at first blush, and Tom might think it so. But it was better to crush his hope at once rather than to let him go on deluding himself that anything could reunite them.

The packing occupied some hours, but she worked hard and late, and finished it before going to bed.

The night's rest and reflection confirmed her in the plan, and she awoke anxious for Daphne to come, that they two might determine on some course.

At the same time she was anxious to know the object of her sister's visit. It occurred to her that Daphne's coming might, after all, involve her in the risk of discovery. In her present nervous and excited condition of mind this feeling rapidly developed into something akin to alarm lest her sister should be recognised and so placed in danger of arrest.

It must be a strong motive, she reflected, that could induce Daphne to run such risk; and as the time passed, and no letter or telegram came from her, Dessie's anxiety increased rapidly.

The time was getting on indeed for the Count's visit, and Dessie began to fear that the two might meet on their way to the house; and then her active imagination began to picture the possibilities of unpleasantness which might result from that, and to try and determine what to do to prevent them.

But there was no need. A full hour before noon, the time which the Count had appointed, a gentle knock sounded on the door.

It was Daphne, dressed in her nurse's uniform; her hair brushed well behind the black veil which was laid over it, to conceal it as much as possible from sight.

She came in as quietly, and with as much self-possession, as though entering a sick-room in the exercise of her profession, and taking Dessie's hands in hers, she kissed her on the forehead, and said gently,

"I am glad you trusted me with this address, dear. I have come up now to tell you that I have changed. I mean to face this man, Colimbert, and dare him to do his worst."

CHAPTER XXI

THE COUNT'S PLANS

THE Count de Montalt had fully appreciated the significance of Mrs. Davenant's interference as soon as she had told him of the relationship between her and Tom Cheriton. Till that moment he had set down her visit to some action of Dessie's; but the fact that Cheriton's influence would be certain to be exerted to cause Mrs. Davenant to interfere made both her object and motive clear enough.

Nor did he attempt for a moment to underrate the gravity of the step to him. Mrs. Davenant knew as much as Dessie had known at the first; quite enough, if the facts were once impressed on Mrs. Markham, to make the latter altogether unwilling to marry him. His whole scheme was thus in sudden but imminent danger of failure.

Yet in a way he rather enjoyed the incident of the interference. It added salt to a rather flavourless courtship. He had won his victory over Dessie so quickly and with such ease that the effect of that stimulant had worn off. Now, however, there was a much greater difficulty to be faced. Mrs. Davenant was not a woman to be silenced, while that bulldog of a barrister, as he termed Tom Cheriton in his thoughts, would probably hang on to the very last moment.

Moreover, now that there were others who knew his secret, his hold over Dessie was lessened. He was not

actuated by any motive of malice or anger towards her. All he wished was to gain his own end in his own way. If that were done he would rather help Dessie than hurt her. It was only when people threatened him that he turned on them. Thus it would serve no purpose to expose Daphne Marlow when no good for himself was to be gained. He wanted to trade on the threat, not to do the thing itself.

He chose his course with customary promptness.

On his return to the house with Mrs. Markham after Mrs. Davenant's first call he had seen the latter's card and, scenting danger instantly, had begun to prepare the widow for anything that might be said. He told her that Mrs. Davenant was a woman of somewhat abandoned character who had tried at a critical time of his life to force herself upon him; that she had professed an overmastering love for him; and that having heard of his impending marriage she had probably come to try and separate them.

Mrs. Markham's jealousy was fired in an instant, and she was for refusing to have her in the house at all; but the Count said he had more recently become possessed of information about her which would probably free both from her attentions for the future. For this object, in Mrs. Markham's view, the interview had taken place; and when the Count left Mrs. Davenant he told the widow that the visitor had gone.

"I have got rid of that woman," he said, with a laugh. "She won't trouble me again as long as I live. I hate being unpleasant to any woman and threatening her with the police, but it is an unfortunate necessity at times. However, now we can start for our little trip," and he kissed her and smiled into her eyes, as though he had not a thought which he did not share with her.

They had planned a visit to Brighton, and he led her out of the house, chatting gaily and tenderly, and put her into the carriage with an air of solicitude which suggested that she was just the one thing in all the world that he wished to guard zealously and carefully. Then, with the excuse that he had forgotten something, he ran back into the house, and scribbled the letter for Mrs. Davenant, saying it was to be given to her if she called again.

As soon as possible he sent a telegram to Dessie saying he would call the next day instead of waiting until the time arranged, and lying gaily all the time, he chatted to Mrs. Markham during the train journey to Brighton.

"I am often sorry for that Mrs. Davenant, despite her conduct, to me," he said once.

"You always take the charitable view of everybody's conduct, Godefroi," said Mrs. Markham, seeing no need for any display of softness toward a woman who had tried to part them and to win away the Count.

"I wish I did," he said, with that air of self-condemnation which is really self-praise. "But this poor wretch has had the hardest of hard fates—an unhappy marriage."

"I daresay she helped to make it so," said Dora, sharply.

"Oh, very likely. But when I knew the man he was certainly a poor specimen and a brute. Drank like Bacchus himself, and in his cups was a very unpleasant specimen. Beside, he was a rogue, and, I believe, a thief."

"What was he when they married? That's what I should want to know. If he was like that then, why did she marry him? I suppose she had her eyes open. If he was not, then how much had her conduct to do with

changing him for the worse? That is how you must look at a match of that kind."

The widow was in no mood to make excuses or even to hear them made for a woman who had tried to win her lover away.

"She was very anxious to see you," he said, smiling to her. He could see that she was sufficiently angry now to hear anything. "She kept saying that if you would only just hear her, you would never marry me. Then she called me a thief, a rascal, a villain—anything and everything that was insulting—and why? I asked her why; and all I could gather was that my crime was in daring to love you, Dora. The woman is mad, my dear; stark, staring, raving mad, because I would never listen to her. If ever you meet her, or any of those whom she can set against me, you will know how to judge the scandals they may utter."

"How can I meet them? Who are they?"

"One of them, I regret to say, is that young Cheriton —the man who was so insulting to me the other day. I couldn't understand his conduct then; but now I see it. He is this woman's nephew, possibly her tool; and no doubt she set him to insult me."

"I will never let him, or any of them, enter my house again," said Mrs. Markham, vehemently; and in this manner feeding the flames of her anger with the fuel of jealousy, the man so excited her rage against Mrs. Davenant and Cheriton that any tale they might tell would certainly be discredited, and the mere fact that they had uttered it would be accepted as proof of its falseness.

As soon as this point was clear he pressed the subject of an immediate marriage, and as she was only too ready to accede to his wishes the matter was settled as

he had wished it by the time the train drew up at Brighton station. There, however, an incident occurred which annoyed him.

The train came to a standstill just at a point where George Vezey was standing, and as he was expecting friends by the train, he caught sight of them instantly. The Count was irritated, as he had wished the visit to Brighton to be quite unknown. Vezey knew Cheriton, and in the Count's view any chance connecting link with the latter was a possible source of danger. He knew, too, that Vezey would only be too glad to get hold of some reason for interfering with the marriage.

A very few words were interchanged, Vezey saying he should call on Mrs. Markham at her hotel, and then the two drove away together.

"Poor George! He is not a bit like the same good fellow," said Mrs. Markham. "But I can't help liking him. He at least wishes me well, Godefroi."

"You probably; but me doubtfully," answered the Count, with a laugh. "If he has the same feeling toward me that I should have against him, had he taken you from me, he must hate me with a dangerous hate."

"You are very fond of me, Godefroi?"

"I would give my life for you, Dora; or take any other's life who parted us. We men of the South love and hate with the heat of the sun in our blood."

"Could you hate me?" she whispered, taking his hand.

"Yes, if you loved another man," he answered vehemently, "and tearing out my love from my heart I would set it on a poignard's point and drive it right into yours. We of the South hold life cheap where love is false."

"If that is the only danger which threatens my life," she whispered ecstatically, "I shall never die."

That evening he made hot love to her, and before he left to go to his hotel he had arranged to run up to London to get a special license for the marriage.

On his way to London early the next morning he plumed himself on the victory he was winning, and the knowledge that he held both successes in his hand, despite the odds against him, made them infinitely more agreeable than they would have been if won without trouble.

He went first to Doctors' Commons and arranged the business of the special license, and as soon as that was completed he drove to Dessie's rooms. As matters were going so smoothly with him he was in an excellent temper.

"It is wonderful what a little pluck and dash will do in this world," he mused. "The odds against my winning such a woman as my wife were thousands to one that day when I pulled that young idiot Vezey out of the scuffle at Antwerp, while they were almost millions against my ever catching sight of those three rubies. Yet I'm going to pull off both coups, and this in despite of the fact that I've been recognised by a couple of people who know pretty well the worst there is to know about me."

He gave the cabman a liberal fare, and went up Dessie's staircase with the confident tread of a man who feels he is going to win, and he greeted the girl herself in much the same spirit.

"I thought it better to come before the time we arranged, Miss Merrion," he said, in his most courteous manner. "I know that my visits are exceedingly distasteful to you. I regret that of course, as my own feelings toward you are of the most kindly character, but I

cannot fail to see it, and I must act upon it. This will, therefore, be our last interview. I presume you are ready to give me what I have come for?"

"Before I give them up I must know more of your right to them," answered Dessie, steadily; and the firm tone in which she spoke and a note of defiance which he had not noticed before made him look at her in some surprise and curiosity.

"I have not come to discuss anything—merely to receive my own property. You know well that it is mine."

"I have seen Mrs. Davenant since I saw you last, and if I give the jewels to you I may have to account for them to her. It was from her I got them."

"That is nothing to me. They are mine."

"That may be, but I have myself to think of. If I give them to you and Mrs. Davenant informs the police, what am I to say? I am a journalist earning my own living, and am at least methodical enough to know the risks that attach to handling jewels worth thousands of pounds. You must, therefore, give me such an account of them as will satisfy me and any others who may come to make inquiries."

The man began to grow angry.

"What do you mean? I am no fool to submit to fooling of this kind. Have you the jewels here?"

"Certainly I have. But it has been sugested to me that before I part with them to you I should ask you how they came into your possession. Will you tell me?"

"No, it is nothing to you. Do you mean you have spoken of this to anyone? You know the penalty?"

"Yes, I know the penalty," answered Dessie firmly enough. "But the person to whom I have spoken knows you well, so that there is no need for secrecy there."

"Secrecy or no secrecy, I mean to have those rubies, and to have them now." He laid down his umbrella, and went toward the girl with a threatening look on his face. "Will you give them up to me, or am I to take them? You know me."

"You mean that having me alone here, and at your mercy, you will take them from me by force?" she asked, backing step by step warily before him.

"I mean that I will have those rubies. Come, no fooling. I shall use force if you compel me. You are mad to play with me in this way."

Dessie had backed to the door of one of the inner rooms, and stood against it a moment, facing him as if at bay.

He looked at her as a beast of prey might look at an easy victim.

"You had better give them to me," he said, in a tone that was full of menace and rage, and he seemed as if about to rush upon her and seize her in his powerful arms.

Just as he was about to do this the door opened behind her, and Daphne Marlow stepped into the gap. She was dressed, not in her nurse's uniform, but with the magnificent hair which had given her her name of Red Delilah streaming over her shoulders, while her face, white and angry, was set with a look of hate and steady courage, as she stared full into the man's eyes.

He uttered a sharp exclamation of angry surprise.

"Oh, it's you again, is it, you red devil?" he cried, furiously. "I might have known you would be at the bottom of this. I've owed you a debt during all these years, and by heaven, I'll pay it now," and he made as if to dash upon her.

"Stop where you are if you want to live!"

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"Stop where you are, if you want to live," cried Daphne, and she levelled a revolver at his head, and the look in her eyes told him that she was as capable as ever of doing a reckless thing, and shooting him down where he stood.

CHAPTER XXII

A LAST DEVICE

THE mortification and rage of the Count de Montalt when he found that he had been thwarted by Daphne were intense. He knew her quite well enough to be aware that she not only could but would use the pistol against him if he pressed her.

He was quick to recover himself, and accepted the situation, breathing a few deep and hearty curses over his defeat. He laughed, and throwing himself into a chair, said with an assumption of indifference:

"I give in. You've caught me unarmed and unawares, and may make the most of the opportunity. If I'd known you were going to be present I'd have come prepared;" he looked at Daphne as he spoke. "Well, and what is it you want? I suppose you want something."

"Move over to that far end of the room," said Daphne, curtly. "I like to have as great a distance as possible between us at a time like this; and maybe you'll lose your temper before the interview's over. You were never a pleasant customer when things went wrong."

He rose and moved back his chair to the wall without a word. He never did things by halves. He had had to give in; and having swallowed the camel, he did not strain at the gnat.

"Now, I have a few plain words to say to you," said Daphne. "You have tried to force Dessie here——"

"Shall we say Dorothy?" he interposed with a sneer.

"If you wish to be so very plain-spoken, let us have the whole truth."

"It is a matter of complete indifference what you call us here," returned Daphne. "You have tried to force Dorothy to do what you wish by threatening to expose me and to put me in the dock on the charge of murder."

She paused as if expecting him to speak; and noticing it, he said, with another sneer:

"You put the matter cogently. Your knowledge of the facts and of the crime, gathered as it is at first hand, enables you to speak with authority."

"You have twisted the screw one turn too many," said Daphne, taking no notice of the sneer; "and the thread is broken. When I heard from Des—Dorothy what you had done and what you threatened to do, I meant to secure your silence at any cost—even the sacrifice of her happiness."

"Ah, you were always a considerate creature—for yourself," he sneered again; but she paid no heed to him.

"I have changed that intention; and I am glad to have a chance of telling you the truth at once. If you have the courage to charge me with the crime, I will stand my trial, and let the world know what it may of me; but it shall know something of your share in that matter as well."

"The world will be exceedingly obliged to you, no doubt—though you, personally, may not have much opportunity of experiencing its sentiments," he said. "And what part is your virtuous sister cast for in this melodrama? And what is the meaning of all this? Do you want paying?" he asked, brutally.

"We intend to be free from you," returned Daphne, promptly.

"Anyone who passes through the dock to the gallows is necessarily freed from the influence of others. But what are you going to gain by changing from hospital nurse to prison convict—to take the brightest view of your future?"

"Your sneers have no power to move us," said Daphne, quietly. "Nor are we moved only in this by the one motive which you can understand—self-advantage."

"Oh, you've turned virtuous in your old age."

"My object now is to save my sister—"

"By letting the world know she has lived under a false name, is the daughter of a forger and the sister of a woman who climaxed a career of vice with murder. I don't know what you think you're saving her from, but anyone can see what you are saving her for." He spoke with intense bitterness.

"To save my sister," Daphne resumed, as though she had not been interrupted, "from the shame of witnessing the delivery of her friend to your greedy and murderous hands!"

"So you still think and hope you can keep Mrs. Markham's fortune for yourself, eh?" he asked, flashing a look at Dessie.

"You can take your choice of courses, therefore," continued Daphne.

"But you can't do it. I'm not such a fool as to leave you the chance of coming between me and my plans, and you" (to Dessie) "of breaking your friend's heart under the cowardly guise of pretending to shield her, when your one object is to keep a clutch on her money."

"You can do as you please," repeated Daphne. "Either give up the whole scheme, marriage, jewels and all, and leave the country, or go to the police, inform them that you know where Red Delilah can be found, and

stand your chance that way. Adolphe Colimbert may not be an unwelcome visitor himself at Scotland Yard, and this I swear"—she flashed for a moment out of her calm, and her voice rang with deep intensity of feeling—"not another hour shall pass, unless you leave the country, without Scotland Yard knowing that the Count de Montalt and Adolphe Colimbert are one and the same person."

He laughed—and a perfectly easy self-assured laugh it was.

"Just as you please. The whole thing is getting very interesting and almost exciting. But you've made one little miscalculation. You, Dorothy, not Daphne; she"—and he pointed at the latter—"wouldn't have made it. Your rich friend is already all but my wife. We left London yesterday together for a destination that no one knows, and we are to be married to-morrow morning privately—I have the special license—and in the evening we leave for the Continent on our honeymoon—a pair of happy, trustful, devoted lovers." He told the lie with emphatic precision.

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Dessie, excitedly.

He shrugged his shoulders, and raised his hands.

"Nevertheless it is true," he retorted, "and you may ask your most remarkable and experienced sister whether I am not quite calculated to hold what I have once won."

"I don't believe it," repeated Dessie.

He laughed again, as if at her scepticism, but in reality to conceal the thoughts that were fast crowding upon him. He was beaten, and only at the last moment when he had made sure that he stood on the very threshold of success. But he meant to yield fighting, and so long as there was a bare possibility of winning he would carry on the struggle.

With the elder sister in London ready to face the exposure and go through with her trial for the murder of the Indian prince, all his power over both the girls was broken. He could only hope to win all and openly so long as the girls were kept apart and Dessie could be frightened into silence to save her sister at any cost.

But there were other ways of winning beside those which were open and on the surface. The Rohilkund jewels were worth half a king's ransom; thousands could be got for them as a reward for their restitution alone, while if a means could be found of selling them, they were worth a fortune. Of the two he would as soon have the jewels as the widow; and it was for this purpose he had told them of the arrangement to marry the widow on the following day.

After a long pause he dropped the bantering, sneering tone in which he had chiefly spoken, and said, with a kind of calculated bluntness:

"Now tell me what is your real object in this? Is it to compel me to lose my hold on Mrs. Markham? If so, what terms do you offer?" The change in his manner disgusted Dessie, but the elder sister read it aright. Either the man wanted to make terms, or to hide some other object and plan.

"You can leave the country," she replied readily.

"Not enough," he said.

"What do you want?"

"The jewels, and at least a thousand pounds. I shall get more from Mrs. Markham."

"You'll not have a thousand pence from me; and as for the jewels, not a stone of them. Do what you will."

He rose from his chair as though in answer to the challenge.

"Nothing that you can do can prevent my marrying

Mrs. Markham to-morrow—nothing shall prevent it; and when once she is my wife——" He finished the sentence with a look which he intended to be a threat; and in that sense Dessie instantly interpreted it.

"Why not give up the jewels?" she cried impetuously, looking at Daphne, and at the same time putting her hand to her dress as if to take them out. The man noticed the gesture quickly and turned his face away that the elder sister should not see his eyes.

He knew now where the jewels were; and the curt refusal by Daphne that followed did not concern him.

"As you will," he said, assuming an expression of baffled anger and intense mortification. "But I'll be frank with you. To-morrow, Mrs. Markham will be my wife, and then you may be sorry enough that you refused my terms."

With that he opened the door viciously and slammed it angrily behind him. When he was halfway down the staircase he stopped to think. An idea had occurred to him and he set his quick busy wits to work to think out its details.

The gesture which Dessie had made, as if to take the jewels out of the bodice of her dress, had shown him that she was carrying them on her.

His scheme was simply not to lose sight of the girl until the rubies were in his possession; and to do this he resolved on the daring plan of getting Dessie herself into his power.

He argued—and a shrewd enough argument it was—that so long as the rubies remained out of the safe they would be in Dessie's care. He had left it all uncertain whether or not he meant to accuse Daphne of the murder of the Indian, Maiwand; and, obviously it would be the height of imprudence for her to risk being arrested with

the property of the murdered man actually in her possession. Such a thing would make it infinitely more difficult to prove that she was innocent of the crime. Moreover, only Dessie herself could go to the safe to put the rubies back there; while it was extremely probable that her first instinct would be to rush off to South Kensington to ascertain whether Mrs. Markham had really left London with him.

His task was thus to make sure that Dessie had no chance of putting the rubies back in the safe, until he should have had an opportunity of taking them from her if she carried them about with her; or of ransacking her rooms for them if she left them there.

To get her into his power he resolved to use once more the man who wanted to marry her, and was, he knew, willing to go to almost any lengths for that end—Sir Edmund Landale.

He wrote a hasty note to the latter.

"Come at once with your brougham to the corner of Great Russell Street, and then come on foot to the corner of D. M.'s street, where you will find me waiting for you. If I am not there, drive as quickly as you can to Edgcumbe Square, South Kensington, and wait for me at the north end of the Square. Do not delay a moment. You can win D. M. now certainly, if you will."

He gave the letter with a liberal tip to a hansom cabman, and told him to drive as quickly as he could to Sir Edmund Landale's address; and as soon as the man had whisked his horse round and started off at a fast trot the Count chose a spot where he could watch the door of the house where Dessie had her rooms, and waited for her to come out. If his calculations were right, she would come soon, because she would be in a

hurry to get to South Kensington, and ascertain the news about Mrs. Markham.

His plan was to follow Dessie, to get her involved in a street row, and to arrange that Sir Edmund Landale should appear in the middle of it as if by chance, step in, save the girl from those who might be molesting her, put her into his carriage, and drive her away. He knew, too, that the baronet had a place, a house in the suburbs, to which Dessie could be taken; and once safely housed there, the rest would be comparatively easy.

As he stood waiting, de Montalt watched the people in the street until a woman of the kind he wanted passed. He spoke to her; told her that he would give her a couple of sovereigns if she and one or two more would hustle and mob Dessie at a signal from him. They were not to harm her; but they might pretend to recognise her as an old companion, and if she was indignant, to abuse and threaten her. If the two sisters came together, they were to be separated in some way; while the whole thing was to be stopped when a gentleman should get out of a carriage and come to Dessie's rescue.

The woman was glad enough to have a chance of earning the money easily, and did not stop to ask what was to happen to the girl, or whether any harm was meant or not. Her anxiety was whether she would get the money when the work was done. The payment of half-a-sovereign in advance settled her scruples on that account, and she hurried away to find companions who would assist her.

De Montalt's fear now was lest Dessie should come out before the Baronet could arrive and have the plan explained to him; and as the minutes passed without the sign of the brougham, his concern increased.

The woman came back, bringing with her four companions as ill-looking as herself and ripe for any street mischief. If the Baronet did not arrive before Dessie left the house, it would be necessary for the street scene to be laid in South Kensington, and for this purpose the women would have to be driven over there. The Count called up the woman and explained this to her, and while he was speaking to her he saw a smart brougham pull up and Sir Edmund Landale get out and hurry in his direction.

"What is it?" asked the Baronet, eagerly, as he came up. "Am I in time? What has happened?"

"Do you want to get Dessie Merrion completely into your power?" asked the Count, in reply. "If you do, there is a chance now; and I will help you." In a comparatively few words he explained the whole plan of the pretended trouble and the rescue. "As soon as you have her in the carriage drive off at a smart pace in the direction of South Kensington, going along Oxford street, and then make for that place of yours in St. John's Wood. You can invent some sort of excuse for not going straight to South Kensington, and the girl will be too excited over the street adventure, and too grateful to you for rescuing her, to ask many questions. I'll follow, and then we can settle the thing together. Once get her to that house and she'll never leave it except as your wife. Now, you understand?"

The other man yielded readily, and rather liked the scheme; and it did not occur to him to ask what the Count's motive was likely to be. It was enough for him that the plan seemed to promise what he wanted.

In another minute the two men had separated to wait for Dessie's coming.

They had not to wait long now. A few minutes later she came out of the house alone, and after casting a quick glance up and down the street, she walked at a good pace in the direction of Oxford street—the direction which took her straight into the midst of the women who were on the watch for her.

CHAPTER XXIII

TRAPPED

The calculations which the Count had made as to the probable actions of the two sisters were singularly shrewd and accurate; and the moment he had left them they set to work to plan out their best course of action.

"What does he mean to do, Daphne?"

"It is impossible to say yet," was the reply. "He has probably gone away to think over the new position and to make some fresh plans. He won't give in without a big effort; and much of that effort will depend upon how far he thinks he can get off scot free from any investigation into the murder of the Indian. If he is sure that my conviction will be secured without any risk to himself, my arrest will take place within five minutes. He will bring the first policeman he meets up here."

"Oh, Daphne," cried her sister, with an expression of pain.

"I am not afraid, dear. I have taken up the cross and I'll carry it now. Better the trial now than the uncertainty that lingers like a canker, killing every hope. I didn't kill the man. I didn't even rob him, as robbery is understood in criminal courts. But if I am not to live a life of constant disguise and fear of discovery, the trial must come; and so far as I am concerned the sooner the better."

"I can't endure the thought of it."

"If I can, you may," said the elder sister, curtly.

"I don't mean for my own sake only. The thought of your having to face a whole court of people, and——"

"It's not that I flinch from," said Daphne, interposing. "The world and I have always been on terms of mutual dislike and distrust, and one more chance of showing it won't count for much with me. Besides, I had my fling, and must pay the cost. I'm no coward. But I'm not by any means sure that it will come to that. I thought so when you first came to me; and I'll own I was scared. But this scoundrel has too much to hazard to risk it thoughtlessly."

"He is such a desperate man, Daphne."

"Desperate, yes, but always with one eye to his own interest. Let him have what influence he may with this fool of a friend of yours—this Mrs. Markham—the knowledge that he is really Colimbert and Lespard rolled into one—a convicted murderer in the one character, and a very probable one in the other—would certainly prevent her marrying him. To accuse me and rake up that horrible scandal will mean the wreck of his marriage hopes, therefore, at the start, and he won't do that without strong reason."

"But we are going to stop that marriage in any case; and he knows it."

"No, he only knows we've said so. He is too accustomed to threaten one thing and mean another to take every threat of ours for gospel."

"Yet I do mean it," said Dessie, firmly. "I wish we had done what he asked—given him these wretched jewels and let him get out of the country with them as soon as possible, and be quit of him." She took them out of her dress as she spoke and tossed them on to the table. "If I can save Dora now it is as much as I want, and he can have the rubies with pleasure."

"It will be time to think of that when we know really what he means to do. So long as those rubies remain in your possession you can make your own terms with him. Let him get them, however, and we shall both be at his mercy. At present he clings to the hope that he can both win the rich wife and force or juggle us out of the jewels. To-morrow he will know that Mrs. Markham at any rate is lost to him—that is if we can find her—and then these stones will have a much greater value in his eyes. Keep them. You had better keep them not I. If they were found on me, supposing I am arrested, things would probably go much harder with me. I should take them back to the safe if I were you."

"I will," said Dessie, "but I am anxious to go and find out the truth about Dora Markham. Even an hour's delay may be serious now."

"Then you'd better go at once."

"But what will you do, dear?"

"Wait here for what happens. I have made up my mind. Do you think I am not as resolute as you?" and Daphne smiled. "You won't be very long away in any case, and I shall put on my uniform and be Nurse Morland once more. If anyone comes for you I shall be only a nurse waiting to see you for journalistic purposes, or some such excuse. We nurses are used to exercising patience. Get back as soon as you can, and then we will settle our next step."

Dessie was not many minutes getting ready.

"What shall I do with these?" she asked, when she was ready, holding out the rubies. "I can't carry the cigar case about with me, nor the tobacco cake. I think I'm a little nervous about having such valuables on me at all."

"There's not much fear in broad daylight," replied the

other. "But wait, let me look where we can best hide them. Not your stays—that's the first place everyone thinks of. Better here." She unhooked the girl's dress skirt, and in a few minutes had stitched the rubies into the top of the skirt at the back, where the gathers effectually hid all sign of them. "There now, even a professional searcher might run her hands over you and miss them."

They laughed at the precaution thus taken and with a kiss parted, Dessie running lightly and quickly downstairs. As she closed the heavy door behind her, and stood a moment on the top step, she glanced round, the thought in her mind being to make sure that the Count de Montalt was not waiting for her; and seeing nothing, she walked off at a brisk pace.

She had barely turned the first corner, however, when she found her way barred by a number of women, gaudily dressed in flaunting but shabby clothes.

They formed a semi-circle in front of her, and one of them came close and held out her hand.

"Ullo, Molly, old dear, who'd a thought of seeing you here? You are a toft, you are. Wot's your lay now?"

"What do you mean? I don't know you," said Dessie, quickly, feeling not a little alarmed at the women's looks and gestures. They all burst into a loud, discordant laugh when she spoke, and the one who had addressed her turned to the rest and said, with an oath:

"My! ain't she proud, the bloomin' 'ussy. Look 'ere, Moll, that ain't good enough fur me. You may be a fine lydy—as yer thinks yer are, praps—but you never paid me that arf quid you borrered, not you. No, nor ever shelled out for them boots as yer sneaked. I dessay yer all right; but, if so, shell out now, and be —— to you."

"I never saw any one of you before in my life," said

Dessie; "and, of course, you all know that well enough. I'm only a hard-working girl, like any one of you, and——"

"'Ard workin' gell be sugared," cried the spokeswoman. "I ain't no 'ard workin' gell, and you knows that well enough. No more ain't you. But I want my coin—that which yer borrered, and that for all the things yer sneaked; and what I want to know is—are yer goin' ter pay or take the consequences? I don't care which; and so that's straight, eh gells?"

A chorus of approbation came from the four women, and this was followed by an evident disposition to change from words to something more serious. They jostled Dessie, abused her for having borrowed money and stolen things, and closing round in a small semi-circle shut her up against the wall of a house, and barred every way of escape.

The incident did not last more than a minute or two, but it quickly developed so threatening as aspect, that Dessie was thoroughly frightened, and looked in all directions for the help which did not come.

When it had reached its height, a brougham drove by rapidly, the occupant called, in a loud voice, to the driver to stop, he jumped out, and before the women seemed to have realised what had happened, Sir Edmund Landale pushed his way into their midst, gave his arm to Dessie, who was now trembling and frightened, and handed her into the carriage.

"You can explain afterwards," he said, as he handed her into the brougham. "Let us get away first. Who on earth are these creatures;" he exclaimed, as the women crowded round the carriage gesticulating and shouting as if in anger at having been baulked in their purpose.

"I haven't the remotest idea. Either they made some extraordinary mistake, believing I was some former associate of theirs—that was what they pretended—or else they meant to hustle and rob me. At any rate, I was really frightened, and infinitely relieved when you came bursting through them to my help." She smiled her thanks.

"I am only too glad I happened to be passing and saw you. What a lucky coincidence! But now, where are you going? Let me put you in safety, at any rate." The brougham was being driven at a quick pace along Oxford Street, in accordance with de Montalt's instructions.

"I will get out here, I think," said Dessie. "Anywhere will do. I am quite myself again now, I'm not likely to be worried twice in a day by such an adventure."

"I think you had better wait a little longer yet. Besides, it is so pleasant for me to have you here, to drive with me, that I hope you won't hurry. Where are you going?"

"To South Kensington—to Mrs. Markham's house in Edgcumbe Square."

"I am going to South Kensington myself," returned her companion. "Let me drive you there. You will get there at least as quickly as if you go by any other means. I have one call to make by the way which will not take up much time, and my horses travel fast. What say you?" He asked the question in a tone of such apparently genuine solicitude, and Dessie was so really grateful to him for the service he had just rendered her, that she consented. She was without a suspicion that anything was wrong or that the whole incident was not due to quite natural and innocent causes.

Sir Edmund Landale turned the conversation into the safe grooves of small talk; chatted with her about her

work, told her he had bought copies of all her books, pressed her to tell him what she was writing, urged her to make use of him in any way to get her writings better known, and was altogether so pleasant and agreeable that when the carriage turned out of Oxford Street to the north toward Finchley instead of south toward Kensington, she scarcely paid any heed to the fact more than to accept the explanation he volunteered that he was just going to make the business call he had before referred to.

The brougham went at a great pace along Baker street and across into St. John's Wood, and when they had passed the shops and were rattling through the squares and streets of private houses, Dessie began to feel a vague uneasiness.

"I am really in a hurry," she said at length, and her face wore a look of doubt. "Are you going very far?"

"Oh, no, the place is only about five minutes from here, or at the outside ten; and really you will be quite as soon at your friend's. From Holborn to South Kensington via Finchley road is not the shortest cut, of course; but it is quicker behind a pair of horses like mine than in an omnibus, and much safer than on foot. But I should like to tell you what this little business is of mine. You are a woman journalist and knock about a good deal; so you'll really be a judge. You writers pick up all sorts of odds and ends of useful knowledge, and I daresay you know a lot about singing birds. Do you? I've been asked to buy a wonderful cage bird—a great beauty, and a splendid singer and talker; extraordinary that for a small bird, isn't it? And to tell you the truth I have rather jumped at the chance of having you with me to see it. There are so many scores of ways in which a man gets taken in in things of the kind, where a wom-

an's sharp eyes can see the imposture in a moment. And you know I have unbounded faith in you." He laughed lightly as he added. "I hope you won't be awfully angry with me for having brought you so far out of your way on such an errand."

"I'm afraid I should have said no, had you asked me in the first place," said Dessie, candidly. She was annoyed, and did not conceal it.

"I am really very sorry. Shall I stop him now?" and he took the check string in his hand. "I will if you wish it; but you can really do me a little service, and it is not far now."

Dessie's good nature conquered her irritation.

"I can really be of no use whatever to you in the matter, but if you wish to make the call, don't hesitate on my account."

"I have not asked you much," he returned, as if a little annoyed and disappointed at her manner after the help he had been to her in the matter of the women; and feeling this, Dessie was more gracious.

In this way he blinded her completely to the fact that the house he was taking her to was his own, and that his object was infinitely treacherous and cowardly, and when the carriage was slackened and after passing through a pair of gates and along a circular carriage drive was pulled up sharply in front of a small house standing by itself in pretty secluded grounds, she still had no suspicion.

"This is the place. Will you come in?" asked her companion, and his manner showed his nervousness now that the critical moment had come.

Dessie seemed to notice the change, and it made her hesitate about leaving the carriage and entering the house.

"I don't think I'll come in," she said, peering out at the house. "I don't like the look of the place. Do you know anything of the people?"

"Everything," he answered, recovering himself and smiling. "Come in. I shan't be more than three minutes settling everything."

Dessie yielded reluctantly and against a subtle instinct which warned her that all was not right. She rose slowly when the door had been opened and followed the baronet up the steps of the house.

As she was in the act of entering, the sound of wheels caught her ear, and turning to glance back she saw a cab enter the carriage drive at a quick pace, the occupant being the Count de Montalt.

She stopped on the very threshold, and would have turned back, but her companion grasped her arm firmly.

"This is the room, Miss Merrion," he exclaimed, and hurried her into one on the right. Then with a laugh, he added, "I call this now the cage, and you are the bird."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Dessie, very angrily.

"Simply that this is my house and you are my guest."

"You mean you have trapped me here?" cried the girl indignantly.

"I mean that I am only too delighted to have you as my guest; but this gentleman will help to explain matters;" and as he spoke the Count de Montalt entered the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE HAND OF THE ENEMY

THE Count came in smiling and suave as usual, and his eyes showed a gleam of excitement at the success of the plan which had been so rapidly formed.

Dessie herself was filled with fear, but she was far too shrewd to betray her feelings. She knew the character of the one man profoundly—that there was no length of villainy and even cruelty from which he would flinch. To let him see that she was afraid of him would have been sheer madness.

As to Sir Edmund Landale, she was in doubt. He was rather de Montalt's dupe than his accomplice, and it remained for her to see how far he was a conscious tool. Much would depend upon her accurate reading of the relations between the two men, and on the adroitness with which she could play off the one against the other.

But her contempt for the baronet was intense, and she could not but recognise how insecure her chances of escape from evil were, since they depended only or mainly upon his not proving so big a rascal as he appeared.

It was a desperate position, indeed; and as the considerations flashed one after another through the girl's thoughts she seemed to understand how great her peril might really be, and what terrible consequences would certainly follow any false move on her part.

Her first step was clear. She must ascertain what the men wanted. Putting a bold front upon matters, there-

fore, she waited only until the Count had closed the door, and then addressed him sharply:

"Sir Edmund Landale tells me that you have taken the chief part in entrapping me here. Why have you done so?"

"My dear Miss Merrion, you can surely answer that question for yourself, without my help," he answered, smoothly. "There can be but one reason. My friend has an overpowering desire for your company. His interests are mine; his desires, in this case, mine—" he spoke here with a double meaning, which he managed to convey in a particularly expressive glance, "and what could I do but place my poor services at his disposal?"

"You are not speaking the truth," said Dessie, curtly. "You are not the man to act without having your own interest first. What is it that you want? What is your price?" she asked contemptuously.

"You are naturally angry at having been caught in this way—and I excuse that most gratuitous insult. I have no price. I seek nothing. So far as I am concerned you are as free as air to go when you please."

"You mean you were paid to get me here, and having done your dirty work your master will pay you."

"I mean nothing of the kind," he replied, imperturbably. "I have no object whatever of my own to seek."

He was lying, obviously; and the girl rapidly sought for the reason, ransacking her mind for a probable clue to his conduct. Why should he deny that he had an object in getting her into the power of himself and the other?

"If I can go I will," said Dessie, suddenly; and she turned and walked quickly to the door. The baronet put himself in the way, while de Montalt looked on smiling.

"You can't go yet, Dessie," said the former.

"Will you tell me the truth—why I have been brought here? Do you believe that man when he says he has no object of his own to serve in trapping me?"

"It does not matter to me whether he has or not," was the answer, rather doggedly spoken. "You are here, in my house—in my power if you will; and I cannot let you go."

"What is your price?" asked the girl, defiantly.

"You can only leave this house as my wife." The answer came, clearly spoken, with a determination that evidenced the obstinacy of a selfish man.

"Then I will die here," answered the girl, with equal determination, as she moved back and sat down.

The Count laughed.

"It is a very pretty situation," he said, "very pretty indeed. Strephon is mad with his great purpose, has caught pretty Phyllis in the toils, and threatens all the pains and penalties of unrequited love if she will not yield to his suit; and Phyllis sits down in a chair and calls on Death to come and shake her resolution with a touch of his cold, grimy finger. I don't think you'll wait for Death, Miss Merrion. You'll find him a cold consoler."

Dessie took no notice of him; and a long silence followed, broken at length by a sneering laugh from the Count.

"I think you ought to know part of the truth, at any rate. I am not ashamed nor afraid to tell my share in this business. You owe it to me entirely, and not to my friend here, that you have been brought to this house. I ought to make the admission, and I do freely, because otherwise you may do what I see you are inclined to do —put some of the blame upon him. I told this gentleman

that it was a matter of the greatest urgency for me to have you taken somewhere, in order that I might have an absolutely secret interview. He believed me; and I laid the plans accordingly. As you have probably guessed, the crowd of women into whose midst you walked half an hour ago were paid by me to molest you. In the middle of it Sir Edmund here drove up and you jumped into the brougham in the belief that you were being saved from a very awkward fix. A word or two of explanation secured your being brought here to this house. And my friend consented to the little deception because he believed he was rendering me a great service. There I deceived him. That is the true story of your coming here; and until now I have not had an opportunity to explain to him that my motive was not at all what he thought, but solely to help him. I caused him to do what, for himself and on his own account, he would never have done; and you must please not blame him when the whole share falls to me. I am not afraid to carry it."

He shrugged his shoulders as he finished, and with a waft of the hand seemed to throw the responsibility away from him.

"I am sure that is not true," said Dessie, readily. "In the first place it sounds false; and in the second it is so utterly out of character with everything I know about you, that I don't believe it for a moment. Do you know who this man is?" she asked, turning upon Sir Edmund and pointing at de Montalt.

The latter interposed swiftly.

"The question is not who I am; and we should not accept the description of a young lady who, having been considerably outwitted, is angry with the man who has outwitted her."

He looked at her with a warning and threatening expression which made her pause.

She began to read the riddle now; and the knowledge gave her some little encouragement.

Clearly he did not wish her to tell the baronet his real character; and this told her that his apparent indifference to her presence in the house was the result of some calculated purpose. This gave her a ray of hope. If he was playing a double game, against Sir Edmund Landale as well as against herself, her own wits would probably soon show her a way to help herself. She must first see what knowledge the other man possessed.

"How much do you know of what has passed between this—gentleman and myself? Has he told you anything?" she asked sharply, turning again to Sir Edmund.

"What is there that he should know?" interpolated Montalt.

"What do I want to know? That is the question. I care not a jot for anything he may have said to you or you to him. You are here. That is enough for me."

"I begin to understand the position now," said the girl, quietly. "And it will not turn out as you think. My friends are neither fools nor powerless."

"They won't look for you in Sir Edmund Landale's arms, all the same," sneered de Montalt. "You don't seem to understand the position, for all your words. No one knows that you are here. No one can possibly trace you here. No one can, therefore, look for you here. So far as others are concerned you have disappeared—that's all. Thousands of people drop out of sight in London every year—and there are thousands of reasons to account for it. What is one young woman more or less in

big, brawling London? Why, a thousand might go and not one be missed."

"We shall see," said Dessie, firmly, though her heart sank, for she knew there was plenty of truth in what he said.

"Yes, we shall see; and as the days pass and you do not return it will only be set down to your eccentricity. You will not forget that once before you had to cut adrift all connections with your old life and make a plucky start in a new one. If once, why not twice? Don't deceive yourself. You can't be found here in this house; and when the little splash of your jump into the pool of obscurity has subsided, and the surface is all calm again, you will be absolutely forgotten."

"Do you mean you are going to keep me here forever?" asked Dessie, laughing incredulously. "We are not playing a melodrama, we three."

"Nevertheless, you will not find it easy to escape," was the reply, coldly and deliberately spoken. "And you are forgetting one thing. You are alone in the house, and there are no other women here. You can only leave it —more than compromised."

At the words Dessie turned chill. She had had in her mind the fear of personal danger only, and this other effect had escaped her altogether.

She looked straight at Sir Edmund Landale.

"Do you bear out this man's words?" she asked.

He said nothing, and would not meet her eyes.

"You hear what I say?" she said, her heart sinking within her at his silence. "Have you sunk so low that you can contemplate the dastardly scheme of trying to force me to marry you by such a means as this?"

There was a long pause, in which he stood irresolute and uneasy under the steady look of her eyes He looked

up swiftly once, but as quickly let his eyes fall; and when he did answer it was with a sort of sullen defiance which was perceptible alike in his manner, tone and words.

"I've told you more than once I'd do anything to win you, and I meant it. Any way that makes you give in to me is welcome, and—you must give in now."

"Then heaven help you for a pitiful scoundrel," cried the girl desperately. "And mark this: I'll starve rather than yield to you. Ten thousand times sooner than be your wife I'll kill myself, and do it cheerfully."

"I shall not give up for any hot words spoken now," replied Landale. "Nothing shall make me give up now, indeed, when I have the whole thing in my hands."

"We shall see," answered Dessie, smiling as if in rather contemptuous disbelief, but inwardly very much afraid. "Perhaps you'll tell me what I am to do? Where is my jail? Who my jailer? What my jail food? The whole thing is so monstrous that I am compelled to laugh at it."

"Nevertheless, you will find it no farce," said the Count de Montalt, angrily, "and no laughing matter."

"Nor you either," answered Dessie, resolutely. "If I do not make all London ring with the infamy of this my pen has lost its cunning."

"People are not generally eager to write up their own defeat or their own dishonour. Wait," he said, with a malicious sneer.

"It is not only my own defeat I should have to record," retorted the girl. "But do what you will. I am indifferent."

"Your rooms are upstairs. Will you go to them?" said Sir Edmund, after a moment of silence.

"Do you mean will I go quietly or shall I require you to carry me?" asked Dessie, laughing. "It might be

more melodramatic if I were to scream and struggle and force you to gag and carry me, as people would have to, say in one of my stories. But I prefer to look at the farce of the thing and walk. I presume that a day or two's reflection will show you the rank absurdity of this ridiculous conduct, or, at any rate, convince you that you had better make terms with me instead of being gibbeted all over London and in half the papers in the kingdom as the hero of a sort of illegitimate Jackson case. Which is the way? Show me." She stood facing the two men pluckily, and laughing to hide the genuine dismay that she felt.

The baronet opened the door and led the way upstairs, the Count de Montalt following close on Dessie's heels, as though to prevent any attempt at escape. But she was far too shrewd to make any effort of the kind. It would have been useless then. If she was to escape, it must be when the men were far less on their guard than at that moment.

She entered the rooms they showed her without the least hesitation, standing a moment to make a rapid survey.

"Has it been the padded room of a madhouse?" she asked, with a laugh. "It might have been."

This was true enough. The first was a lofty room, lighted from a skylight, and the bedroom, which adjoined it, with a strong door between them, was equally lofty, and also lighted from the top.

Escape from such a place was absolutely hopeless was Dessie's first thought; and this increased her fears. But she hid them under the laughter of ridicule and indifference.

"It will make an excellent study," she said, lightly, when her first question remained unanswered. "I sup-

pose, jailer, I can have paper and ink. I'll begin my story at once."

"You have but to ask and you can have everything you want."

"Everything? Oh, then, I'll have my liberty, please," she said, in the same light tone.

"Everything but that," answered Landale. "You are at home, the mistress of the house, and can order what you please."

"Can I? Then turn that man out of the room," she cried, pointing at de Montalt, who smiled; "and never let him enter it again. And do you follow him."

"You are a plucky girl, Miss Merrion," said the Count, with an air of admiration, "and for once at any rate, you have but to speak to be obeyed. I must go. Can I take any message to my Dora?"

He smiled, and bowed to her with mock politeness, and then taking the other man by the arm, went out of the room with him, leaving Dessie in a condition of mingled relief at his departure, impotent anger at her present plight, and rapidly rising alarm on the score of possible consequences.

Could her friends find her? If not, what was to happen?

CHAPTER XXV

FACE TO FACE

WHILE Dessie was thus plagued by her doubts and fears, matters were moving very fast outside. Mrs. Davenant's return had been the signal for some very energetic action on the part of Tom Cheriton. He could not leave his uncle, in consequence of the latter's critical condition, but he set some machinery in motion which could not but have important consequences.

Mrs. Davenant told him frankly and fully all that she knew about de Montalt, disclosing without reserve the incidents which had culminated in the meeting of herself and Dessie at Birmingham station. But she added that there was evidently something more behind than Dessie's possession of the rubies, though the girl would say nothing.

"Are you sure this is the man?" Cheriton asked. "Quite sure?"

"I tell you we spoke together about it when I saw him at that infatuated woman's house, where he played me that trick."

"And he didn't attempt to deny himself?"

"Certainly not. How could he? Instead of that, he ran away, leaving me the letter I have given you."

"Can you guess why he bolted?"

"No; but I should think to get the widow out of our way. He has two objects—to make that woman his wife,

and so stop our mouths out of Dessie's regard for her; and secondly to get possession of the rubies—to frighten Dessie out of them."

"I think I see what to do," said Cheriton, after a pause of thought. "I wish I could get up to town to Dessie. But wishing's no use. I shall wire a hint of the truth to someone who'll move heaven and earth to outwit the Frenchman. That's Vezey, the fellow who was going to marry the widow till the other man turned up. If anyone can ferret the two out, he will."

With that he despatched a telegram to George Vezey, to his London address, telling him that he had found out the true history about the Count de Montalt, and urging him to wire at once where Mrs. Markham was.

George Vezey was at Brighton when this telegram was delivered, and it was sent on to him by post. It reached him the next morning, and he replied at once that he had met Mrs. Markham and de Montalt at the station; she was staying at the Grand Hotel, and that, if the facts were wired him, he would see her at once.

A telegram from Cheriton was the result, saying, "His real name is Rolande Lespard; been tried and convicted for murder. Warn Mrs. M——" With that telegram in his pocket, Vezey went to the Grand Hotel.

He saw there was much restraint in Mrs. Markham's manner when she greeted him, and she made little secret that she was not pleased to see him.

"I am very busy to-day, George," she said, "and I can't give you more than a few minutes. I really ought to have been 'not at home' to you; but I didn't want to be rude."

"It's awfully good of you to be so frank," he answered with a dry laugh. "But you needn't apologise. I suppose that Count fellow keeps you pretty well to him-

self. But I've got some bad news for you, I'm sorry to say."

"You don't look it," she retorted sharply. "But then you're very much changed. You used to be so nice."

"I'm not the only one that's changed."

"If you've come to be disagreeable and say nasty things about my friends, and make insinuations, I'd much rather you'd go away and leave them unsaid."

"My dear Dora, you don't give a fellow a fair chance. I'm awfully sorry if I've got to hurt your feelings—but I must tell the truth."

"Look here, George Vezey," said the little woman, getting up and speaking angrily in defense of the man she loved. "If you're thinking of saying anything against the Count de Montalt behind his back which you daren't say to his face, don't come to me. I suppose you've watched him out of the town, and come now because you know I'm alone. It's not very plucky."

"There's no need to sneer at me like that," said Vezey, warmly. "I haven't invented the bad news, I suppose." Then changing, he said gently, "Look here, Dora, don't say these raspy things. You know how they cut me. I have come to speak to you about the man who calls himself the Count de Montalt; but I didn't know he wasn't here. I'll wait till he comes back, if you like. Only it's something that must be told, and can easily be tested."

"I don't care when you say it, or what you say either, for that matter," said Mrs. Markham, with assumed indifference. "One time is as good as another for a slander; and if you want to say anything, say it, by all means."

"What do you mean will make no difference. Don't you care who the man is, or what he has done then?"

"I care nothing what you may say he has done."

"It's not what I say——"

"No. I suppose it's Mr. Tom Cheriton," cried the widow, impetuously, with a sharp guess. "He would say anything against Godefroi, because he believes he has had something to do with Dessie Merrion having jilted him. If you have no better authority for your slander you needn't expect me to pay any heed to it."

"It is from Cheriton, and you can do what you like about believing it. He tells me that de Montalt is not only no Count, but is a man who has had a most awful past."

"Past," exclaimed Mrs. Markham, laughing. "What have I to do with his past? It is his future he gives me; not the past. What does your friend say next?"

"Dora, you're a fool; a perfect little fool," burst out Vezey, very angrily. The sight of her feeling for the other man irritated him beyond endurance, while her evident intention to pay no heed to what was told her aggravated the feeling tenfold.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Vezey," she said, rising again. "You must excuse me, I am very busy."

"I beg your pardon. It's I am the fool. A confounded fool to care two straws about the matter at all. But I'm not going to see you give yourself to a villain like that and hold my tongue."

"I will have you shown out of the room if you dare to say another word against the man I am going to marry, in spite of you or all the Merrions and Cheritons on the earth," and she stamped her foot in temper.

"Read this," he said, holding out the telegram. "I wanted to break the news; but if you're such an impetuous little spitfire, you must take the consequences."

"This is my answer," she said; and she tore up the telegram into little pieces. "I won't believe any such

slander against the man I love. Now, will you go away? I am expecting him back every minute, and if he finds you here and learns what you have said, I will not answer for the consequences. You are not strong," she added, with a curl of the lip.

"Thank you; you have been as ungenerous as a woman could well be to a man whom she has treated as you have me. I have warned you; I can do no more. I shall now deal with him. I am going to the police."

"Stop a minute, George. I'm sorry I sneered," she said, laying a detaining hand on his sleeve. "But you don't know what is behind this. I do. You are being made only the tool of a bitter woman, who seeks this revenge for a disappointed intrigue. I know all about this. There is not an atom of truth in it."

"I think there is," he answered, making ready to go, "and I shall find means to get at the truth within an hour or two. Don't blame me now if there is a public scandal. You leave me and others no choice."

"What do you want to do?" Mrs. Markham was all indecision and instability the moment she found herself opposed by a resolute will. It had occurred to her now that if there really was anything against her lover she might unwittingly bring him into trouble by forcing Vezey to go to the police.

Her companion saw her irresolution, but did not understand it, though he determined to make use of it.

"All I ask is simple enough," he said. "Have this thing sifted. Let us face the man and see what he himself says. If we're wrong you can set us all down for a pack of meddlesome dogs; if we're right, then you will be saved from heaven only knows what sort of a future. Let us go back to London, and have the Count, as he calls himself, face to face with us."

"To do that would be to insult him with the idea that I believe this hideous story," she cried, irresolutely.

"Not to do it will be to put the police on his track perhaps," answered Vezey, bluntly. "You can choose."

"I hate you!" she flashed out, impulsively.

"You won't when the fever's over," he answered, laconically; and he stuck to his point doggedly until Mrs. Markham was obliged to yield, and had to consent to return to town. It had been arranged that in the event of her wishing to communicate with de Montalt, she was to wire to the hotel in London where he had been staying, and a telegram was now sent off to tell him what had happened.

As soon as that had been done, Vezey sent a telegram to Cheriton, telling him the result of the interview, and urging him to come up to London so as to be present at the interview with the Frenchman, and thus be ready with proofs to checkmate him at once.

The telegram reached the Count de Montalt at a moment when he was in considerable perplexity. Everything promised well for the desperate coup he had planned; but his doubts arose in the following way. He had satisfied himself that Dessie still had the jewels with her, and he knew that she would be unable either to get out of the house at St. John's Wood with them, or to hide them there in any place where he would not be able to find them. He knew, too, that there was not the remotest chance of her agreeing to Sir Edmund Landale's terms. She would starve sooner. And he felt that he had her thus safely in his power.

But he felt that he ought to make assurance doubly sure, and after getting rid of the baronet in some way force the jewels out of Dessie at once by threats or promises. His rough plan was to make the giving up of the

rubies the price of Dessie's liberty; and he did not doubt for a moment that she would pay it.

To do that would take time, however, and he had already been so long away from Mrs. Markham that he feared to cause her uneasiness or suspicion—a most undesirable thing at such a moment of crisis. But there was another and much more serious obstacle. Sir Edmund Landale, having got Dessie into his house, was not at all disposed to trust the charge of her to anyone else. He would not be persuaded to leave the place at all; and thus de Montalt decided to leave the getting of the jewels to another time.

He went straight to his hotel, and found there the telegram from Brighton announcing Mrs. Markham's return, telling him that strange charges had been made, and asking him to go to Edgcumbe Square.

Instinctively he scented danger, and as quickly prepared himself to face it. A glance at his watch and at the time when the telegram was despatched showed him that he might yet be able to intercept Mrs. Markham at the station; and a couple of minutes later he was being driven swiftly to Victoria.

He must meet her alone if possible, as it was then that his influence could be best exerted. He attributed the present change to George Vezey; but he was confident that he could overcome any doubts which the latter might raise in the widow's mind.

At the station he was beaten. A train was almost due when he arrived, and he waited for it. But there were no signs of either Mrs. Markham or Vezey; and his ill-luck angered him. It was the train she was almost sure to have caught, and it was clear that she must have travelled by another route. He set this down to Vezey's interference also, and cursed him for it. There was noth-

ing left therefore, but to go with all speed to Edgcumbe Square and wait there for her.

He bit his moustache in ill temper as he drove away. Nothing annoyed him more than to make a miscalculation of the kind; and his superstition made him look on it as a bad omen.

At Edgcumbe Square he found that the servants were expecting their mistress, but she had not arrived. There was a telegram telling them to make preparations; but that was all. He said he would wait, and went into the library to smoke a cigar and think.

What could have happened? He did not like the look of things at all; and the minutes of his waiting seemed to pass on leaden wings. He detested inaction, and nothing wrung him like suspense. He chafed now like a caged animal.

After he had waited in this impatient fume for nearly an hour the bell was rung loudly enough to attract his attention. He thought it was Mrs. Markham, but as no one came to tell him of her arrival he rang and asked the servant who it was.

The answer startled him more than enough.

"Mr. Cheriton and a lady, sir;" and the man had scarcely ended his reply before Mrs. Markham and George Vezey arrived, the former very cross, and troubled, and bitter. Her anger was increased when she heard that Tom Cheriton was waiting; but Vezey was infinitely pleased.

The widow went straight to the Count, Vezey close at her heels. When de Montalt saw her he rose, and with an expression that implied the strongest reproach, asked:

"Why have you done this?" Then he took her hands and held them.

"I can answer that best," said Vezey, interposing. "It's my doing. I went to Mrs. Markham after you had left Brighton, and told her I had heard certain things against you, and that she had better come back here and have it out face to face. At first she wouldn't, and only gave in when I said that if she didn't I'd go straight to the police and see what they had to say. She caved in then; not because she believes me, but to avoid a row."

"It's very good of you to interfere," said de Montalt, with angry sarcasm changing into a threatening tone, "but I should like to know what the —— you mean by it."

"I didn't believe a word of what was said, Godefroi, but you were not there and I didn't know what to do," wailed Mrs. Markham, shrinking from the wrath she saw on his face.

"I'll tell you quite plainly what I mean by it," said Vezey. "I am told your real name is Lespard, and not de Montalt; that you are no more a Count than I am; and that not so many years ago you were tried for your life and convicted. Is that true?"

"Is this what has brought you up trembling and frightened all the way from Brighton, Dora? I am surprised." He spoke very gently, with an infinitely clever assumption of absolute indifference to the charge and a suggestion that what disturbed him was not the charge against himself, but the fact that she should have been troubled by hearing it. "Of course you didn't believe it; I know that. Never mind." Then he put his arm round her, as if to reassure her, and turned with an assumption of great dignity to George Vezey. "The impudent tale that you now venture to tell is quite beneath my notice. Mrs. Markham knows perfectly well where

to look for the source of it. You would have acted a more manly part had you come in the first instance to me, instead of trying to frighten a woman."

His assurance and manner produced a great effect on Vezey, and more than half persuaded him of the groundlessness of the charge.

"It is not my tale," he said, after a pause. "It is Mr. Cheriton's; and as he is here in the house he had better come in. I'll fetch him."

With that he left the room, and the moment he was gone de Montalt threw his arms round the woman who was clinging so trustingly and lovingly to him and kissed her passionately.

"You believe in me, sweetheart?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

"Nothing on earth shall ever shake my faith. I care nothing if only you love me," she murmured with passion equal to his own. Then he stood with her hand in his, as calmly as though not a word had been whispered against him.

Tom Cheriton, Mrs. Davenant and Vezey came in together.

"I am sorry to be here on such an errand, Mrs. Markham," said Cheriton. "I am afraid it must pain you to hear what we have to say."

"If it is anything against the Count de Montalt, Mr. Cheriton, you will find me an unwilling listener," said Mrs. Markham, stoutly.

"It is nothing against the Count de Montalt," said Cheriton, emphasising the name. "It is against Rolande Lespard, the man whose hand you are holding, and who has imposed himself upon you. He is Rolande Lespard, and five years ago was tried and convicted of the murder of his uncle, old Paul Duvivier."

"What proof have you of this monstrous story?" asked the widow.

"I can prove it," said Mrs. Davenant. "I was present when he was arrested, and when I was——"

"What were you doing when you were as you say present?" Mrs. Markham suggested by her manner of asking this question that she knew the answer, and her lip curled.

"It is not a pleasant story, but I am prepared to tell it in such a case as this," answered Mrs. Davenant, quietly.

"I do not want to hear it, thank you. I know enough of the facts to more than satisfy me of your motive in coming here to try and make mischief. I must ask you, Mr. Cheriton, to be good enough to take the lady away."

"I shall do nothing of the kind until you know the facts," he said.

"Then I shall call my servants to my assistance," answered Mrs. Markham, angrily.

There was a pause of much awkwardness, and before anyone broke the silence a servant knocked and entered.

"A lady wishes to see you, mum," began the man, when the door was thrust open wide and Daphne Marlow, in her nurse's uniform, came in quickly.

"I will speak for myself," she said brusquely to the servant, and while he left the room all the rest looked at her with profound astonishment.

CHAPTER XXVI

DAPHNE'S STORY

No one was so keenly moved by the entrance of Daphne Marlow as the Count de Montalt. But he did not allow himself to be surprised, since he had foreseen that the sisters would be sure to attempt some communication with Mrs. Markham to stop the marriage, and it was likely enough that as Dessie had not returned, the first place her sister would look for her would be at Mrs. Markham's. But her arrival was none the less unwelcome because it was probable. He had to choose his course rapidly, and as he had all the facts which were necessary to enable him to judge what must now almost inevitably happen, he had formed his resolve almost as soon as Daphne had entered the room.

"I have come in search of Dessie Merrion," she said, in her firm, melodious voice. "I must ask you to pardon my coming in unannounced, madam, but the matter is so urgent and so unusual that I could not wait."

"Miss Merrion is not here. What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Markham, who took the interruption in very bad part. She had released her hold of the Count's hand and came forward to speak to the new comer.

"I learn that she has not been here, either," said Daphne; "and it is because of that and because this—— gentleman was here that I came in as I did." She hesitated over the term, and after glancing quickly and shrewdly at the other three people who were in the room,

she added: "I have much to say that concerns him, and perhaps we had better be in private."

Tom Cheriton took in the situation instantly.

"You can speak before us freely. My name is Cheriton; Miss Merrion is my affianced wife; Mrs. Davenant and Mr. Vezey are here on much the same errand as yours. We have just told Mrs. Markham that that man is not what he says, the Count de Montalt, but Rolande Lespard, a convicted felon. If you can give additional proof, do so at once."

Daphne looked across at de Montalt fixedly during a long pause; and he returned her look with equal steadiness.

"He will not deny himself to me," she said, quietly, "and if he does, it will be useless. He knows that. It is not more than a few hours since we met in Dessie's rooms, and he knew that I had resolved to run the risk of exposing him."

"Godefroi!" The cry came like an appeal in pain, and Mrs. Markham looked from one to the other in the deepest agitation. The statement that he had been in Dessie's rooms moved her more than all the charges.

"You vowed you would trust me," he answered. "I swear to you there is some horrible mistake. All these people are mistaking me for some other man. Don't you believe me?" He went to her side and took her hand, pressing it feverishly.

"Yes, I believe you," answered the woman, yielding at his touch.

"Then let us clear the house of these slanderers, whose sole object is to malign me for their advantage, and so to try and part us."

He made as if to lead Mrs. Markham out of the room, but Daphne quietly stepped in front of the door.

"No," she cried, in a voice that rang with decision. "You know me better than that. I have not come here to be baulked in this manner. If you attempt to play false with me now I will put you straight into the hands of the police—you know for what crime."

"Stand out of the way," he cried angrily, "or I'll force you."

"No, no," said Cheriton, going quickly across to Daphne's side. "There can be no talk of force here. You are not alone with women. Mrs. Markham, you must see that there is much more here than either you or I can understand as yet."

"If I cannot leave a room in my own house when I please, Mr. Cheriton, what am I to think?" said the widow, now very angry.

"You cannot," said Daphne; and in another instant she had locked the door and handed the key to Cheriton. "Keep it, Mr. Cheriton, while what has to be said is said in this room. If this lady insists upon the door being broken open, send for the police—and the first constable that comes will take out that man as his prisoner."

The Frenchman threw up his hands with his familiar gesture of indifference, while he mentally cursed himself for not having secured the key of the room.

"My dear Dora, you really ought to take better measures to keep the house free from lunatics," he said lightly and with a sneer. "But if this particular lunatic wishes to tell us a story and locks us all in to make sure of an audience I've no special objection. It's always best to humour this sort of madness I've heard. Come, child, sit by me and let us be amused together. Now, what is it you wish to say? Please say it and take the collection quickly, and then go home again."

The ineffable impudence of his manner was indescribably galling but it had no effect upon Daphne.

"I am prepared to tell the whole story, if you are prepared to listen," she said quietly.

"I cannot understand you at all," cried Mrs. Markham, in dismay and perplexity.

"That man and I are old associates, Mrs. Markham. In years gone by I lived a life all wildness and wrong, and he was my companion and backer."

"I care nothing about what happened years ago." said the widow, holding fast by her love and faith.

"It climaxed in a deed that made all England ring with sensational horror—a deed of blood. I was held guilty of it, and he committed it. Knowing that I should have the greatest difficulty in proving my innocence I fled, and from that moment changed my life. I became what you see by my uniform I am—a nurse, Nurse Morland. He hid as well, and took with him some of the ill-gotten proceeds of that crime; he forced them from me by threats. The chief of them were three rubies of priceless value—the Rubies of Rohilkund. For these a large reward was offered, and I know that he carried them about with him for some time, afraid or unwilling to get rid of them. During the time he was thus hiding he went to the home of an uncle, Paul Duvivier, in the Southwest of France, and from motives of greed murdered the old man in his sleep. He was suspected, but for the time escaped and returned to England."

"All this is nothing to me. I don't believe it," said Mrs. Markham, impetuously. "I believe you are all actuated by wrong motives against him. I won't believe it."

"It is all capable of proof in ten minutes' time," was the deliberate answer. "In England, though under what

circumstances I do not know, he was mixed up with some one in the Midlands; and he was one day at Birmingham station in the company of some woman, when he was arrested on an extradition warrant for the murder of his uncle, tried, convicted, and sentenced."

"I don't believe it. What is it to me?" persisted the widow, determined not to credit a word of the tale. "I have heard of it already once to-day."

"If you will be patient a moment even you will see the truth. When that arrest took place, Dessie Merrion——"

"Who?" ejaculated the Count with a sneer.

"For the present, Dessie Merrion. You will understand the meaning of that sneer in a moment. By itself it is a proof that he knows full well the truth of every word I utter. Dessie was on the platform, saw the arrest, warned the man's companion of what had taken place, and induced her to fly. In the excitement the two women exchanged handbags, and when Dessie looked into hers, she found the Rohilkund rubies cunningly hidden. She did not know what to do with them, and eventually locked them up in a safe with the Deposit Company here in London. They have been a burden to her ever since."

"Why did she not give them over to the police?" asked Cheriton, who had listened to this part of the story with breathless interest.

"For two reasons. Her own bag was returned to her and with it a letter saying she was to destroy everything in the one which she had taken in mistake, except such things as she would see the writer would wish to have again, if ever she dared to claim them. But the second was the main reason. She was flying from an old life of evil associations and surroundings and trying to make

a new start in a new name; and she felt that if she had to stand the fire of any inquiries, the whole opportunity of the new chance would be shut. She preferred silence—and, I say, preferred it wisely."

"How do you mean—a life of evil surroundings? I have never heard a word of this," said Tom Cheriton.

"Prudence again, I suppose," ejaculated the Count, with a sneer.

"Probably she put off the telling for the same reason we all put off the doing of unpleasant things—and she put it off until too late. But let me go on. She put these jewels away, expecting never to hear any more of the matter, and certainly never to see the man again. But she was wrong. You know what her life has been for the last four or five years, Mrs. Markham, for you were her chief friend. You can judge then of her horror when, in the man whom you were to marry, she recognised the Rolande Lespard who had been convicted of the cruel murder of his uncle."

"She said nothing to me," said Mrs. Markham.

"For years the mere thought of the man had been a terror to her, and for the moment she was at a loss what to do. Then she resolved to tell Mr. Cheriton the next morning. But before she left here, you will remember, she had a long interview with the man himself. She told him pluckily that she recognised him, and warned him not to come here again. After that she went to find you, Mr. Cheriton; but you had been called away, and she was thus left alone to fight this man single-handed; and it is no surprise that he beat her."

"Beat her? How could he do that if this extraordinary tale be true?" exclaimed Mrs. Markham, with indignant disbelief.

"For reasons that do credit to that villain's skill,"

cried Daphne, for the first time showing signs of her indignation. "He first attempted to poison her in this very house. Do you remember a cup of tea being spilt and broken? That was poisoned, and we have the proof in the analysis. Then he searched her room here that night, to try and regain possession of the poisoned tea. He failed—Mr. Vezey here can tell you something of that—but he found a clue to the fact that she was in reality the possessor of the jewels, the woman he had been searching for, and then, jumping to the conclusion that there was some secret in her life, he got into her rooms, ransacked her papers, and found there enough to show him her identity. His own knowledge and some other help from a congenial scoundrel, Sir Edmund Landale, led him to know the secret sorrow and fear of her life, so that he could hold his knowledge over her, and not only threaten her with exposure if she exposed him, but also put me in the dock on the charge of murder."

"And you? Who are you?" asked Mrs. Markham, sharply.

"I am her sister. It was to protect me from the fate which this man threatened that she consented to give up you and bear all the weight of this secret. A nobler or purer girl does not breathe than my sister—Dorothy. Her name is Dorothy, and, like mine, Marlow. We are the daughters of a father who was convicted of forgery, and the sisters of a brother who was tempted by his own father into crime. That was the life she was flying from. She would tell you nothing, Mr. Cheriton, when you questioned her the other day, because, in her opinion, it was too late. When she was engaged to you, and, indeed, until she came to me, three days ago in the North, she knew nothing of the deed the exposure of which this man was able to hold over her as a threat should she expose

him. She would never have told you, but have gone on bearing the load in silence, had I not come up and said I would tell the truth at any cost."

"Poor Dessie! What she must have suffered!" exclaimed Cheriton. "Where is she now? Why not here?"

"She left her rooms to come here some hours ago, soon after this man had been there, and she was to come back the moment she had seen Mrs. Markham. She did not return, so I came after her; and now I learn she has not been here at all. I know well enough where to put the blame for devilry of this kind; and when I heard that man was here, I resolved to come and ask him where she is."

"You might as well ask me where last night's moon is," exclaimed de Montalt, with a short laugh. "I have had enough of this rigmarole and am tired of it. I don't know where this young woman without a name is, and don't want to know. Moreover, if I did know, I certainly should not utter a word to help you. Now, Dora," he added, in a sharper voice, "What are we to do next? Are you as tired of this cage as I am? I may say at once that so far as this story goes, I shall take only one course. It is true that Miss Merrion—or Miss Marlow, or whoever she is—did make this very preposterous accusation against me. I held it back from you because I did not want you to be worried with fables of that ridiculous character. But I did then what I will do now. I will leave it to Mr. Cheriton, who is an English lawyer, to decide what proofs he wishes to have that there has been nothing but a hideous mistake in regard to me. I shall have no difficulty whatever in explaining the nature of this extraordinary resemblance."

"Resemblance!" exclaimed Mrs. Davenant, speaking

now for the first time. "Why, when I was here yesterday you did not attempt to deny your identity."

"Nevertheless, the fact is as I say," he returned, quite unmoved. "I can explain the whole matter to Mr. Cheriton's complete satisfaction, and am ready to do so."

"No time like the present," said Tom Cheriton. "Do it before we leave the room."

"I must get to my papers. They are at my hotel. You can come with me; and if you give me your word that I shall never be offended by seeing you again, you need not take your eyes off me until I have convinced you."

"I can trust myself so far," said Tom; and he opened the door.

"In less than an hour I shall be back, Dora," said de Montalt to Mrs. Markham. "And then at last we shall be freed from this canaille." He growled the word from between his teeth.

"Mr. Cheriton, you will need all your wits. He is never more treacherous than when complying," said Daphne, warningly. "You had better have the police."

"You shall have them when I return," said de Montalt.

A cab was fetched and the two men left together, de Montalt with a profusion of regrets for tearing himself away from Mrs. Markham for even an hour; and his last word was a pledge of honour to be back within the hour. But he had already made up his mind that he could never set his foot inside the house again. He knew when he was beaten; and he knew now that so far as marrying Mrs. Markham was concerned the chance was utterly lost.

He ceased to strive, therefore, and chose the one remaining course that was open to him.

He intended to shake off Cheriton and make a dash for St. John's Wood, get the rubies from Dessie, and then laugh at those who had found him out.

It was quite dusk as the cab rattled along the Brompton Road, and the two men sat side by side in stolid silence; de Montalt thinking quickly as to the best means of getting rid of his companion.

Fortune favored him. When the cab reached Hyde Park Corner there was a block and a crowd caused by a street accident. The cab stopped, and Cheriton, in his eagerness to see what had happened, rose from his seat and holding by the rail of the splash board, stood up to look out.

Watching his opportunity, de Montalt grabbed the reins as they hung in the front, pulled them with a violent jerk on the horse's mouth, and so caused the animal to start back suddenly. At the same instant he put all his strength into one vigorous thrust, and pushed his companion off the cab into the road, where he staggered and nearly fell. He recovered himself in a moment or two. But it was too late.

The cab was empty. De Montalt had sprung out on the other side, and dashing in among the people, was lost sight of directly among the surging, heaving crowd.

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH INTENT TO MURDER

THE elation which de Montalt felt at having so easily shaken off the inconvenient companionship of Tom Cheriton soon gave way to a fit of intense passion at the failure of his plans.

Despite his practised and habitual self-restraint, his ill-temper completely mastered him, and as the thought grew upon him that the chief cause of all was the girl who had first bearded him, his rage concentrated itself upon her. If it had not been for Dessie, nothing could have robbed him of success, no one would have had a suspicion of his real identity, and nothing could have stepped in between him and his purpose.

Gradually the feeling prompted a desire of revenge upon her, and he began to think how best to shape his plans so as to take that revenge completely and safely.

In her present position he ought to have no difficulty in getting her absolutely at his mercy. She was in Landale's house, alone, unprotected, and absolutely defenceless. Not a soul, save himself, Landale, and the confidential blackguard of a servant, knew of her presence there, and if anything was to happen to the girl—if she were to die suddenly, for instance—the trouble would be much more likely to fall on the baronet than on him. And that sort of shield for his own crimes had always had an attraction for him.

There was one difficulty. He had tried to get Sir Ed-

mund out of the house before, and had failed. If he could think of a ruse to effect that, the rest would be easy. But if not, the man must take his chance of what happened.

He turned this problem over and over in his thoughts, and at last resolved to send a telegram saying that he himself had met with a very serious accident, and had made a most important discovery, which must be disclosed to Sir Edmund at once, if he would come to the hotel.

He thought round this very shrewdly, and mentally approved the plan. He would send off the telegram, follow in person as quickly as possible, and thus watch the baronet out of the house. If the bait was taken the coast would be clear for at least an hour, and in that time he could do everything.

But before despatching the telegram he had to do two things—to prepare for what might happen if he succeeded in luring the baronet away, and a much more critical matter, to prepare for what he might have to do if the ruse failed. He was not a man to stick at half measures. He meant to get the rubies into his possession by fair means or foul, and also to vent upon Dessie his rage at the failure of his plans.

In one shop he bought a revolver and a handful of cartridges, and in another a long, ugly-looking knife. It might be dangerous to use firearms, he thought.

As soon as he had completed the purchases, he jumped into a cab, and was driven to the post-office nearest to his hotel, and from there he sent off the decoy telegram.

He took this trouble so that there might be no loophole for the other man's suspicions to creep in; and as soon as he had handed the form to the clerk, he got into his cab again, and told the man to drive with all possible speed to St. John's Wood.

When he reached the place he chose a spot from which he could watch the gateway of Landale's house, and note the effect of his message.

His cabman had beaten the telegraph office. He had been some minutes at his post of vigilance before he saw a lad in uniform come lounging up the road and as he neared the house, begin to fumble in his wallet for the message, and search for the name and number of the house.

He watched him deliver it, and saw him come out again, and go back the way he had come, swinging his arms and whistling loudly.

Ten minutes later, to his intense pleasure, de Montalt saw the bait had been swallowed. The baronet himself came out of the gate, looked up and down the road as if for a cab, and then turned and walked at a brisk pace in the direction of the town.

As soon as he was out of sight, de Montalt slipped from his hiding place, crossed the road rapidly, walked up the drive to the front door, and rang the bell. He waited impatiently for the door to be opened. He was eager to get to work. He had much to do, and only a little time to do it in. An hour at the utmost would bring Landale floundering back, with the knowledge that he had been fooled; and probably with more knowledge than that if Cheriton went on to the hotel, as was exceedingly probable.

When no one answered his ring his impatience grew rapidly, and he pealed the bell twice very vigorously. He could hear it clanging in the lower part of the house, but still no one came to open the door, and then he began to guess the truth.

Landale had sent even his servant away; and Dessie was absolutely alone in the house. His heart beat with

exhilaration at the thought; and a minute later he resolved to break into the house.

He went to the back of the house to find a weak spot by which to get in. All the windows were fastened; but he was too old a hand to be stopped by a check of that kind. Selecting one of the smallest, he passed the thin long blade of the knife between the sashes, and with a dexterous movement unfastened the catch and opened the window. Thus, in less than a couple of minutes he was inside the house, and having fastened the window again was feeling his way through the gloomy passages and kitchens to the staircase.

He crept up very silently, looking on all sides warily to satisfy himself that no one was about, and when he reached the hall he stepped quickly to the front door and shot the bolt, a smile of sardonic satisfaction passing over his face.

"Those who are out can stop out," he muttered; and then as soon as he had made a rapid survey of the rooms on that floor he mounted the stairs quickly to the room where Dessie was shut in. Before attempting to enter that, however, he went into every room in the upper portion of the house to make sure the place was quite empty.

Everything was as still as he himself could have wished it, and it was with an assurance of success that he turned towards the door of Dessie's room.

But at that point he met with a check. The key was not in the door, and in the rapid search he made, he could see no trace of it. Time was valuable, and he cursed this piece of ill luck as likely to cause some delay. He first tried suasion, and knocked at the door. No answer came until he had repeated the knock more than once, his impatience showing in the increasing force with which he rapped.

"Who is it—and what do you want?"

"It is I, the Count de Montalt. I have come to set you at liberty."

"Thank you, I'd rather stay where I am, with the door between us, than come out to you."

"I have come expressly to set you free."

"I don't want freedom at your hands."

"Open the door."

"Not on any consideration."

"You had better."

"Your threats are all one with your wishes. And be careful, I have arms; and if you dare to try force, I shall use them."

De Montalt made no reply. It was no use wasting time in talk. There was nothing for him to do but to break the door in, and this was no easy matter. He was a man of great strength, but though he pressed against it with all his force, it withstood him, however much he strained. In those efforts several valuable minutes were lost.

He ran downstairs then, to rummage for some tool to force the door or some wire to pick the lock; and his excitement now began to increase, as he thought of the time lost.

The hunt in the lower part of the house cost him several more minutes, until at last he found an old tool chest. A long iron chisel was among the contents, and with an exclamation of satisfaction, he seized it, and ran upstairs again.

Very little work sufficed then to force the door, and as he saw it yield to his efforts, he breathed hard with pleasure.

But the room was empty.

"Miss Merrion, Miss Merrion," he called.

There was no response, and the place was in complete darkness. He called again, and then listened intently.

No one answered; but he heard the sound of someone moving in the next room, and then he remembered, what for the instant had slipped out of his thoughts, that there was an inner room. The girl was no doubt there.

He struck a light for a moment to see the position of the door, and then went and rapped smartly on it.

"What do you want?" came Dessie's voice through the door.

"I want to speak to you."

"Then speak," she answered. "There is no one else here."

"Come out; I have news for you. I tell you I have come to set you at liberty."

"I repeat, I prefer to stay where I am. Why are you alone?"

"Sir Edmund Landale has had to go away."

"You are not speaking the truth; and I know now that you are here for some black purpose of your own. He told me before he left, not half an hour ago, that he was going out. But you evidently know nothing of what has passed since you left the house. The door you broke in was locked on the inside. He himself gave me the key, as a proof that he will not harm me. He has given me also a revolver to shoot him if he tries to molest me. So I know you are lying, and if you dare to come near me you must take the consequences. I'll open the door as soon as I hear Sir Edmund Landale's voice, and not before."

De Montalt's reply was an oath breathed into his moustache, and a vigorous attack upon the second door.

It was soon half open, and then he began to show caution.

It was no part of his plan to give the girl a chance of shooting him, though he was not much afraid of her skill.

"I can open the door at any moment, now," he said, and he put all the menace into his voice that he could. "And I'm in no mood to be trifled with. But I'm in a hurry. Hand out those rubies and I'll let you off."

"I haven't them," said Dessie.

"I don't believe you. They were on you when you came here, I know that. Will you give them up?"

"I have given them to Sir Edmund Landale; and if you can get them from him, you may have them and welcome. I told him how I got them, because I meant him to understand your reasons for trapping me here and deceiving him."

At that moment the bell of the front door was rung very furiously, and the clanging of it travelled up from below.

De Montalt started at the sound and rolled out an oath.

It was probably the owner of the house who had returned, to find the door barred against him.

Obviously what had to be done must be done at once.

One violent wrench with his weapon completed the work on the door, and it was open; but Dessie had piled every article of furniture that she could drag or lift, to strengthen the defences, and when the Frenchman perceived this, his rage passed all bounds. He broke out into a loud volley of threats and oaths, jerking them out as he strained and struggled to force his way into the room.

"You can do no good if you get in," cried the girl, excitedly. "I tell you I gave the stones to Sir Edmund Landale, and he has them now."

"I can deal with you, at any rate," muttered the infuriated man in reply, as with a most vigorous effort he

forced the door open, and sent the heap of things piled against it rattling and clattering to the ground with a great noise.

Then he sprang into the room, but the next moment he was again checkmated, for Dessie put out the light, and then ran swiftly and silently to a spot in the room which she had previously selected for a hiding-place.

This manœuvre baffled him absolutely for the moment. The room was as dark as a tomb. He did not know a foot space about him; and if he attempted to strike a light to look for the girl or the jewels he would immediately be a plain mark for her revolver.

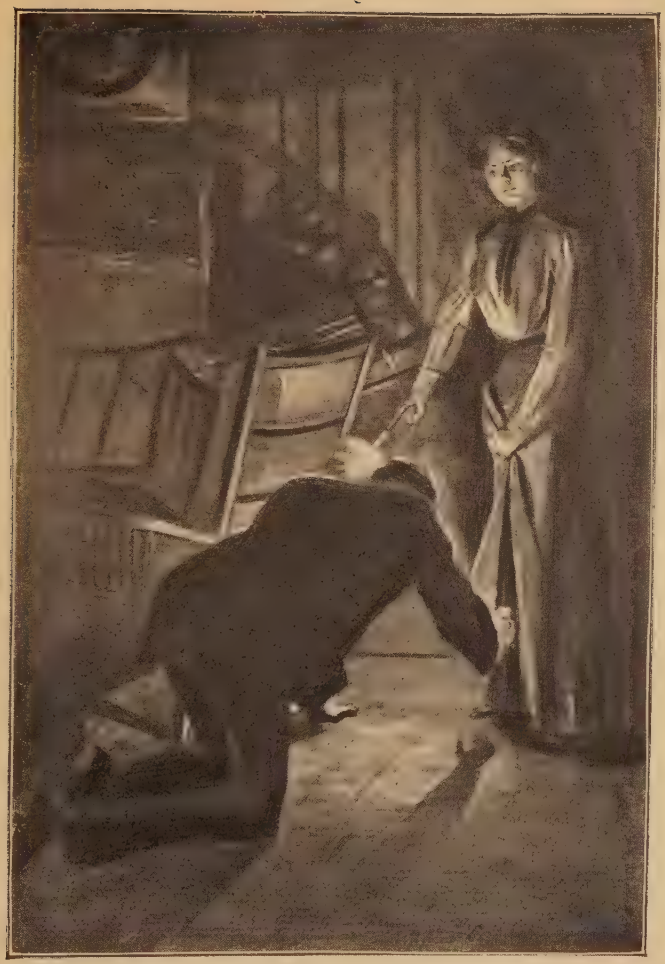
He was now so enraged at this trick, and by the way in which Dessie continued to keep out of his grasp, that his usual calmness deserted him, and the mad desire to vent his anger upon her made it difficult for him to think connectedly.

He stood a minute quite still, gnawing the ends of his moustache and biting his lips in perplexity. Then, loosening his knife in its sheath, he dropped upon his hands and knees and began a systematic search of the room, moving with the care and caution of an Indian scout, and making as little noise as possible.

He had explored half the room in this grim search when a noise at the other end of the room by the door made him jump to his feet and rush in that direction, in the belief the girl was trying to escape and had knocked over something in her flight.

But he could not find her, and when he stood to listen with every nerve strained, the room was as still as a death chamber.

Then he guessed he had been tricked, and that Dessie had purposely made the noise, probably throwing something across the room, to distract his attention.



The flash of a revolver almost blinded him.

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With another curse at her cleverness he began his search again, vowing under his breath that if he found her—and find her he would— she should pay with her life for all this.

Inch by inch he crept across the floor, the deadly intent growing stronger in his thoughts with every moment that passed, and at every step he took he stopped to listen, and to stretch out his hands on all sides of him.

When they touched anything he felt it carefully, and did not let go until he had thoroughly satisfied himself that it was no part of the girl's clothing and no place where she could possibly hide. Now and again he would stop and listen with the utmost acuteness to catch a sound of her breathing.

It was a scheme sure to succeed in the end, and presently the hands, gliding out slowly on all sides of him, touched something which moved.

It was Dessie's foot; and instantly his grasp tightened on it, while he uttered an exclamation of devilish pleasure at his success.

But as suddenly he let go, for the flash of a revolver almost blinded him, and a succession of the girl's piercing screams for help rang through the still house.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GRIP OF DEATH

When de Montalt lost his hold of Dessie her screams ceased and a rustling noise told him that she had moved. Instantly he stretched out his hands and groped rapidly in all directions in the darkness; but he could feel nothing of her, and he sprang to his feet therefore and went to the door of the room lest she should try to escape.

Then he held his breath and listened again, but not a sound came to his ears. The time was slipping away fast, and yet he seemed no nearer the object he had in view.

He resolved then on a more desperate plan. He must take the risk of getting some kind of light, and grapple with the girl. He shut the door of the room and thrust enough of the furniture against it to make it impossible for Dessie to escape, and then felt about for the gas bracket, but could not find it. He cursed his ill-luck. He had now indeed lost all self-control, and was like a madman in his baffled fury and anxiety to get the work done, while his mind was so inflamed against Dessie that he was now to the full as eager to lay violent hands upon her as he was to find the jewels.

And at this moment fortune favored him.

Groping for the gas bracket his hands came suddenly upon the girl, who was standing in a corner pressed against the wall and covered by one of the curtains of the bed.

"At last!" he cried as, one hand seized her, while his other arm was flung round her, to prevent her using the revolver which he knew she held ready to shoot him down.

Cautiously he felt for the hand which held the pistol, and finding it he wrenched the weapon from her grasp and flung it away. Dessie meanwhile sending up cry after cry for help in loud piercing tones.

"Silence, you devil," he cried, forcing her two hands together and holding them in an iron grip, while with the other hand he tore down the curtain and half smothered her in it in order to stifle her cries.

Then he felt for his knife; and a loud imprecation burst from his lips when he discovered that it was gone; that he must have dropped it in the course of his crawling search on the floor.

"Will you give those jewels up?" he cried, between his teeth, emphasising his question with another oath; which was repeated when the girl made no answer.

He shook her violently, and then found she had fainted from terror.

There was nothing to fear now from getting a light, so clasping her tightly in one arm he struck a match and held it a moment over her face, while he scanned it closely and savagely, and then glanced round for the gas bracket. He carried her to it, her body all limp and flaccid, and her head lying helpless on his shoulder, and lit the gas.

But the next instant he dropped the girl, who fell huddled up in a heap on the floor and turned to face Sir Edmund Landale, who burst open the door and came rushing impetuously into the room.

"What are you doing here?" cried the baronet in a loud voice.

"That is my affair," was the answer; while the French-

man's hand went instantly to the pocket where lay his revolver.

Landale seeing the movement guessed its meaning, and without another word sprang upon the other man before he had time to draw his weapon.

A fierce and terrible struggle began, in which each man knew his life depended on the issue.

Sir Edmund Landale had not at first seen Dessie and believed that she had either escaped or been killed; but just as he grappled with his antagonist, his eye fell upon her where she lay huddled together and motionless, and the sight filled him with added fury and nerved him to strain every possible effort.

He thought she was dead, and that de Montalt had killed her; for reasons he could guess, as Dessie had told him some of the story; and the thought lent such strength and impetuosity to his attack that, though he was the weaker man, he bore the other back, forced him to the ground, and fastened his fingers on his throat.

With all his faults he loved the girl with all the strength and passion in his nature; and the belief that de Montalt had deliberately duped him to get him out of the house so that Dessie might be left at his mercy, and that he had broken in to wreak vengeance upon her in this cowardly way, acted like an intoxicating draught and made his frenzy as irresistible for the moment as it was ungovernable.

But de Montalt on his side had strength, and vastly greater skill as a fighter. In courage he was his assailant's equal, in wariness, his superior; and when the first fury of the baronet's furious onslaught had spent itself, the issue of the fight was as certain as anything could be. He let the baronet exert himself to the utmost and pour away prodigally the strength and breath that by and by,

when the final tussle came, would probably cost him his life. The Frenchman did little more than render his assailant's attack as little harmful as possible, while he gathered his energies for an effort with which he meant to decide the issue of the fray.

Gradually and quietly, and with absolute coolness, he gauged the limit of Landale's strength and power, and made ready to defeat him. Little by little he shifted his position until the man who was gripping his throat with hysterical and feverish vehemence was forced into a posture which rendered him liable to be hurled aside; and as soon as he had judged his distance and position, with the wariness of a practised wrestler, de Montalt got ready for the coup by which he meant to get the other at his mercy.

But before it came, an incident happened which affected both men, and had Landale had a weapon of any kind in his hand would probably have given him an immediate victory.

The fall and the subsequent noise of the fight roused Dessie from her swoon, and with a great effort she struggled up into a sitting posture. She was dazed at the furious fight which she saw, and in confusion she followed her woman's instinct, and began to scream with all her power.

The sound once more nerved Landale to fresh efforts, for his weaker muscles were already beginning to tire, and gave such an irresistible impulse to his attack that, for the moment de Montalt was borne back again. It was only for the moment, however, and the next instant, gathering his strength, he tore the Englishman's hands from his throat, and thrusting him violently over, he forced him onto his back, and kneeling on him, held down his head with one hand, while with the other he drew

out his revolver. He was mad with a merciless resolve to have the lives of both.

But the slight delay which her screams had caused had given Dessie time to gather her bewildered wits sufficiently to understand something of the terrible issue to herself should Landale be killed.

By a stroke of luck, the revolver which the Frenchman had torn from her grasp, and thrown away, lay close beside her, and seizing it now, she struggled to her feet, and went close to where the two men were locked in the death struggle. She reached them just at the moment when de Montalt had drawn his own weapon. Another instant would have been too late.

But now, pointing her weapon with the muzzle almost touching the arm with which de Montalt was holding his revolver, she fired.

A shout of pain and rage told her that her shot had done its work. The revolver fell on the floor, and the man's arm dropped and hung by his side.

An oath followed the cry of pain, and still full of fight, he released his hold on the baronet, and turned to attack Dessie with his left hand. But the effort was a vain one. Landale saw his advantage and the girl's danger in a moment, and snatching up the revolver, which had fallen, he levelled it and fired.

The Frenchman fell with a groan, and lay helpless and bleeding at the very feet of the girl whose life he had sought with such relentless intent.

"Are you hurt, Dessie?" asked Landale, gasping for breath after his fearful exertions.

"No, thank God; and you?"

"But for you, he would have killed us both."

"We had better get a doctor," replied Dessie, very practically.

"There is no one else in the house. Will you go, or shall I? There is one in the street, about ten doors to the right, on this side."

"I'll go. I could not bear to be alone with him."

"You will have to be careful what you tell the doctor."

"The truth is the best. The man attacked me in this room, broke in to rob the house, and then tried to murder me. There is no need now to say why I was here. You came back in time, and this happened."

When the doctor came, a brief examination showed him the extent of the mischief.

"He will die," was the verdict. "There is internal hemorrhage. Nothing on earth can save him, but he may linger hours, and perhaps days. Shall he go to the hospital?"

"No, he can stop in the house," said Landale. "Send in nurses, and do what can be done. I will have the place put in order."

The doctor was discretion itself; accepted what was told him, asked no questions except such as were necessary to enable him to judge of the "case," and went away to make preparations.

"What are you going to do, Dessie?" asked Sir Edmund, when the doctor had gone, and they were both collected and recovered from the effects of the fearful scene through which they had passed.

"I am going. You scarcely expect to detain me here after this," she answered, a little sharply.

"Shall I send you home?"

"No, thank you, I have had enough experience of your carriages. Your coachman can't find the way I want to go."

"As you please. Let me say one word, however. I have done with the past once and for all. I swear to you.

You saved my life to-night, and I will prove to you if you will let me that I am grateful."

"You cannot help me," said Dessie. "That wretched man upstairs has broken my life and nothing can help me. For all the store I set by it, he might as well have taken it."

"I shall see Cheriton and tell him everything I have done."

"Nothing you can say or do to anyone can undo what has been done," repeated Dessie.

They parted then. He had walked with her until she found a cab, and as he handed her into it, he said, earnestly—

"I will give my life to making you happier—and in your own way."

She made no reply, but the change in him pleased her, and she was inclined to believe that now at last he was indeed sincere.

She drove at first to her rooms in order to relieve what she knew must be Daphne's intense anxiety on her account. The place was in darkness, however, and when she had lighted the gas she found on the table a hastily scribbled line from Daphne saying she had gone to Mrs. Markham's, and asking Dessie to follow immediately when she returned.

Dessie ran down again, therefore, and told her cabman to drive her as fast as he could to South Kensington. She did not understand what such a message meant; but as she had intended to go to Mrs. Markham's in any event, to carry the news of the strange occurrences of the afternoon and evening, she was content to lean back in the cab with a feeling of pleasure at the rush of the cool evening air on her hot forehead, and of relief that at length one of the chief strains was removed from her life.

The killing dilemma on which she had been thrust would be removed by the death of the man who had brought all this terror into the last few days of her life.

Her friend would at any rate be saved from marriage with a wretch capable of such deeds as he had nearly wrought that very evening. And she shuddered at the remembrance of those moments of literally awful suspense when she knew he was groping about in the darkness to find and kill her, and she closed her eyes in horror at the recollection of her chill of terror when his hands had closed on her, and she had been face to face with death.

At South Kensington her surprise bore down all other feelings. As soon as it became known that she had arrived, all in the house came flocking out into the hall to meet and greet her, and Tom Cheriton who had just come back despondent from a long, fruitless search for the man who had wriggled so cleverly out of his custody earlier in the evening, rushed to her and took her in his arms, despite her protests, and half led, half carried her into the room, where they had all been sitting in suspense.

"I know everything, sweetheart," he whispered on the way. "Your sister has told me; and I'm only sorry you thought it would make any difference to me."

"He would not let me tell you, Tom," she whispered, too happy at having his arms round her and feeling too safe after all her terrible experiences to make more than a faint resistance when he asserted himself. "He vowed the whole story should be told, and Daphne made to bear the brunt of all."

As soon as they were in the room she broke away from him and went to Mrs. Markham.

"Dora, you have a great trial to bear: and I a terrible story to tell you. As all are here, I suppose they have

told you who this Count de Montalt really is, and that I have known it all along. It has nearly killed me to have to carry that secret and to decide whether to dare everything and let you know, or to hold my tongue and bear to see you pass into his power."

"But where have you been, Dessie?" cried Tom.

"Within an ace of death," she answered; and then, sitting by Mrs. Markham's side and holding her hand, she told the whole story of what had happened from the moment of her leaving her rooms to that of her arrival, touching as lightly as she could, for the sake of her friend, upon de Montalt's conduct.

The story produced a profound effect upon them all; and the instant Mrs. Markham learnt that her lover lay wounded and perhaps dying, she insisted upon hurrying away to his side.

CHAPTER XXIX

CONCLUSION

In two or three days Dessie was quite herself again, and her nerves had almost recovered from the strain of the preceding week and the shock of the terrible encounter with de Montalt.

She was alone once more in her rooms, but Mrs. Markham had insisted that for a time at least Dessie should go and live with her. She had pressed this in one or two of the hurried and rather hysterical letters written from St. John's Wood, where she remained watching and nursing with unceasing care the last hours of the man she loved to the end, despite the gross deception he had practised upon her.

Tom Cheriton and Mrs. Davenant had had to go back to the bedside of Mr. Davenant; and Dessie had meanwhile refused to consider their engagement still existing.

"No, Tom. This man's death, if he dies, that is, can make no difference to the real facts of the case," she said to him. "It may prevent a disclosure of them, though that is not certain, because the way in which he has met his end may provoke an exhaustive investigation, and cause everything to be made public. But even if not, if nothing is found out, I am still what I knew myself to be when I told you before I could never be your wife. You have a future before you; and the possibility of your

wife's sister having to stand for trial for such a charge would make our life wretched. It would mine. There would be a perpetual shadow between us."

"And there would be none, I suppose, if we were apart?" He smiled in his usual cheery way, and then added, "I'm not going to be such a donkey as to argue with you when you're in this serious sort of mood. I haven't time: I must get back to that poor old chap at the Smoke-hole, who will be groaning away every tedious second that we're absent from him. There's no hurry about a thing of this sort. But I have an idea, and I'm very much mistaken if the next time I kiss you"—and he did it despite her protesting cry of "Tom!"—"you'll have a very different story to tell. And then I shall punish—oh! I will punish you, and humble that pride of yours: roll it in the dirt and trample on it—for I'll make you my wife about six months earlier than we ever thought possible, and then—" he finished with a succession of threatening shakes of the head. "But now, good-bye—oh, I forgot, I mustn't kiss you again, or it would be 'the next time,' and I'm not ready yet to make you change your decision." He pressed both her hands warmly, and looked into her eyes, and cried, "Now, mind, we're just as much engaged as ever," and with that he went.

Daphne, "Nurse Morland" again, left for the north the next day, to pick up the gray threads of her nursing life there, where for the moment she had dropped them to unravel the scarlet tangle of the past troubles, in order to help Dessie. But before she left she did one thing unknown to her sister. She wrote a long statement of the actual facts of the death of the man whose murder she was supposed to have committed, and gave it to Tom Cheriton.

"If this man, Colimbert, de Montalt, as he calls himself, should be conscious before his death, try to get this read over to him, and let him, if he will, attest its truth. He is a creature of the strangest impulses, and it is not at all unlikely that Mrs. Markham could influence him to tell all he knows of the facts."

Tom Cheriton saw the prudence of this step, and after a little conference with Mrs. Markham entrusted the paper to her, telling her exactly what to do in the event of the man giving any signs of willingness to make such an act of tardy reparation. Sir Edmund Landale was also told; and as he was a magistrate, he promised to remain close by until the man's end, so as to take his depositions if possible.

This was what Cheriton had had in his thoughts when bidding Dessie good-bye; but she knew nothing of it, and spent the two or three days that followed the events at St. John's Wood in trying to plan out what her future was likely to be. She began to do a little work again, and soon commenced to think she would be able to slip back into the old groove, now that the terror which de Montalt had caused was removed.

She was a good deal puzzled what to do with the rubies. She had put them back in the safe with the papers, and now that their full history was known, was anxious to restore them. But she left her decision over until she should have an opportunity of consulting Cheriton; and the thought that now she could do this, because there was no longer even a vestige of concealment between them, was very pleasant.

She could not marry him, of course. Her decision was firm on that point; very firm and resolute indeed. But the remembrance of his last words, that he would make her change that decision, was nevertheless very sweet

and grateful to her. It would be delightful to have him as a friend—a dear, intimate, close, sympathising friend, to whom she could turn in any moments of trouble or worry, and make sure of getting sound advice and comfort.

There would come a time when he would marry, of course, and she was shrewd enough to foresee that that might spell separation. Wives don't care to take to their hearts their husbands' old friends. But he might marry a woman who would have sense enough to—and when she reached that point, Dessie generally left the reverie to take care of itself, and with a reflection that in any case the marriage could not be yet, she would turn to do some practical work, consoling herself with the thought that that at any rate would progress.

Just at that juncture the proofs of one of her stories began to pour in upon her, and one or two commissions for articles and short stories came. She was thus kept very busy, and the days slipped away until she was one day aroused to the fact that a whole week had passed, and not a line or message had come from Tom Cheriton.

It was, of course, quite right and proper that it should be so, she told herself, as she had of her own accord broken off the engagement; but still—it was a little disappointing, and the letterless breakfast on the eighth morning was very tasteless and insipid and quite unappetising. But she shook off her depression and set to work after breakfast with a will.

She had not done much, however, when she was interrupted by the sound of footsteps running quickly up the staircase. They had a very familiar sound; so much so, indeed, that before they reached the door, a great light of expectant pleasure had filled her eyes, and she turned round with a face that was beaming with joy. But she

recollected herself in time, drove the light out of her eyes, turned back to her work and went on writing, so busily occupied and deeply buried in her subject that when the knock came on the panel she cried, "Come in," in a pre-occupied, routine tone, and did not even raise her head from the table.

"Put whatever it is down on the table," she said, not turning her head, though her eyes were dancing with light.

A loud thump, as of something set noisily down, a louder opening and slamming to of the door, and then silence.

Dessie's heart gave a little throb when the door slammed; but she would not look round. She waited and listened, and with a laugh said aloud:

"Strange, that messenger seems to have taken off his feet to go downstairs without making a noise"; and she pushed her chair back as if to get up.

But before she could do so, there was a hearty laugh, one that she knew well, and a pair of arms were round her, taking possession of her with a natural masterfulness that evidenced long practice.

"Oh, it's you," she cried. "But messengers, even if they lose their feet, mustn't lose their heads in this way. This is altogether wrong, Tom. And I can't allow it. I'm very angry."

"I know it's wrong, Dess, but there's nobody to tell about it; and really I am a messenger, a porter, or what you like this morning. I've come to deliver something, though I couldn't put it on the table."

"What is it?" she asked, not quite so innocent and ingenuous as she seemed, for she had been thinking much about the next kiss that he had promised.

"It's this," and he gave her the kiss. "And now

for the change of decision and your supreme humiliation."

"Really?" she asked, not looking a bit humiliated or ashamed, but quite radiant.

"Really!" he answered; and then in her delight she kissed him; she couldn't help it. She was so pleased to see him. He had been away a whole week, and she had to scold him for that, so that she must just give him one kiss first—only as a friend.

"And now sweetheart, having settled our preliminaries and mutually recognised our credentials, to business." He laughed again, stole another kiss, and then sat down.

"Why haven't I had a line from you all this week?" he asked.

"Why haven't I heard from you, you mean," was the answering question.

"I've been waiting. I couldn't write to an obstinate young woman who positively refused to have anything more to do with me. But I've done better than write to you—I've settled everything, and actually got my uncle's consent."

"Consent to what?" asked Dessie, smiling, colouring, and looking down.

"If you affect that innocence again I'll kiss you and rumple your hair," he said, laughing. "What should he consent to but our marriage?"

"I told you that was impossible, Tom." She was serious now.

"I know you did, and I laughed at you for it. So I do now. But our talk musn't be all laugh. There's a smirch of blood and a touch of death about the thing that are anything but mirthful. That fellow's dead; died last night. Landale wired for me to come up yesterday."

"Why wasn't I told? I could have gone to poor Dora."

"You can go to her in a few minutes. It was only late at night; and Mrs. Markham is in bed utterly fagged out and done for. She's better asleep for some hours yet. She's taken this thing very badly. When I saw her last night she seemed almost in a state of collapse. But she has done splendidly for us. She got the man to tell the whole truth and to swear to it as a deposition before Landale as a J. P."

"And what is the truth?" asked Dessie, anxiously.

"He murdered the Indian himself—Maiwand, or whatever his name was—and contrived to put the blame on to your sister. It's an ugly story," said Cheriton, grimly, "and there's no need to dwell on the details of it. The statement clears up the mystery and no more will be heard of it—so far as your sister is concerned."

Dessie had paled a little in her eagerness and uncertainty; but as she looked into her companion's eyes, with the knowledge that now all bar between them was really swept away, her eyes began to brighten and her cheeks to flush, and love bore down all other emotions.

"And what about that decision now?" he asked, reading her thoughts easily enough, and smiling.

"Ah, how glad I am!" she burst out, half hysterically, while the tears of sheer gladness stood in her eyes as she hid her blushes on his breast.

There was a long silence, which neither cared to break.

"One act of justice we must do," said Cheriton, at length. "Give Landale credit for the change in him. He has behaved splendidly in this, and I am sure is mightily sorry for his part. That night's work scared him beyond all description."

"If he will only leave me alone I'll be thankful enough to him," said Dessie, quickly.

"He has done well in this, child, and I believe in him now. So must you."

"I bear him no malice. He was more dupe than knave. But I can't say I have, or ever can have, any other feeling toward him than a desire never to set eyes on him again."

"There'll be no chance of that, for some time at least —he's going out to the Colonies for a long trip."

"And now, what about the jewels—the Rohilkund Rubies? How am I to get rid of them? I am afraid of them, Tom. Their whole history is evil and bloodshed."

"Well, I've thought of that, too; and shall try to find a small counterpoise. We'll give them up to their rightful owners; but we'll get the reward that was offered and we'll give it to a hospital for a Dessie Merrion Ward."

The thought pleased the girl, and she smiled; then mindful of her friend, she said:

"I must go to Dora now, Tom; she may want help."

"In one minute. You've only three things to do first: to say when you'll come down to the Smoke-hole and quiet the impatience of a convalescent but irritable invalid, fix a date when you will make the last change in your name, and—give me a kiss to seal the two contracts.

She smiled again at this, and blushed much more deeply than before, and seeing it, he took her into his arms that she might have time to recover her self-possession.

And when he let her out again, both the contracts had been agreed to and sealed with many seals.

THE END.

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